Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

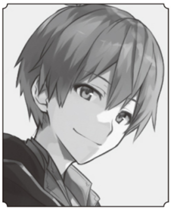
6

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

The Lady of the Sword's Lament and the War in the South

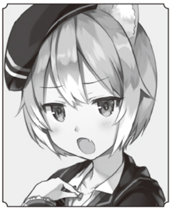
Characters



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters/
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

Allen

Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and Stella's private tutor possesses an extraordinary command of magic, although he remains oblivious to his talents.

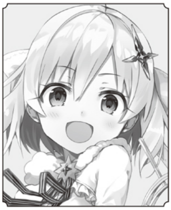


Royal Academy
student council vice president

Caren

Allen's younger sister by adoption is levelheaded but surprisingly needy. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.

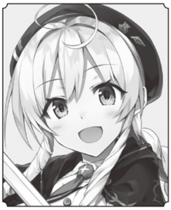
Ducal House of Howard, northernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms



Duke Howard's
second daughter

Tina Howard

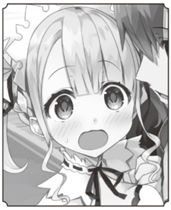
After her talents blossomed thanks to Allen's tutoring, this young lady placed first on her Royal Academy entrance exam.



Duke Howard's eldest daughter/
Royal Academy
student council president

Stella Howard

Tina's serious and hardworking elder sister is the heir to the Dukedom of Howard.

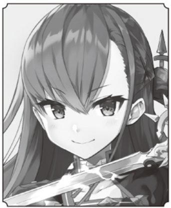


Tina's personal maid

Ellie Walker

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne's frequent spats.

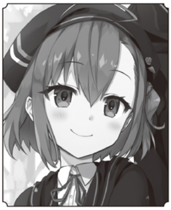
Ducal House of Leinster, southernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms



Duke Leinster's eldest daughter/
Lady of the Sword

Lydia Leinster

Allen's highborn partner is a loose cannon, but she's also the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman.



Duke Leinster's
second daughter

Lynne Leinster

Lydia's younger sister placed second on her Royal Academy entrance exam. She sees Tina, who placed first, as a rival.

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Prologue

"Just a little farther, Miss Fosse," I said. "We'll pause for a short rest at the top of this hill, so please be patient a little while longer!"

"O-Of course. I'm sorry, Emma. Oh, if only I had more stamina," Miss Felicia Fosse replied from behind me, her head drooping with shame. The head clerk of Allen & Co.—a joint business venture by the Ducal Houses of Leinster and Howard—was simply charming.

"Rebellion by reactionary nobles under Duke Algren!" read the unprecedented, urgent report that I—Emma, the Leinster Maid Corps's number four—had received in the gray of this morning. Under my command, the maids stationed at Allen & Co. had repelled the rebel assault on our firm. At present, we were climbing a hill on the southern edge of the royal capital, guarding Miss Fosse as we fled the chaos of the city.

It had been a near thing. I shuddered to think what would have become of us if not for Mr. Allen's letter asking us to keep an eye on the forces conducting maneuvers near the capital, just to be safe.

We needed to make good our escape and report to the Ducal House of Leinster in the southern capital as soon as possible. But Miss Fosse was rather frail, so, as leader of the Society for Covertly Smoothing the Way for Miss Fosse's Romance, I was carrying her piggyback.

Ah, the perks of my job.

On the crown of the hill, I set Miss Fosse down on a small boulder. "Time for a breather," I told the twenty-odd other maids. "Remain vigilant. That goes for those of you in service to the Howards as well."

"Yes, ma'am!" they responded in unison and fell into a defensive formation around the visibly exhausted Miss Fosse. That done, one maid after another began to wait on her.

"Have some water, Miss Fosse!"

"Allow me to wipe away that sweat."

"Do your feet hurt?"

"I'll carry you next!"

"Your spectacles are dirty. Let me clean them."

"I...I'm fine!" Miss Fosse cried, her face, which had been pale with fatigue, blushing bright red. "Jeez! I w-wish you wouldn't baby me so much!" Her long pale-chestnut hair shook as she balled up her little fists and snapped at the maids, but their smiles remained unperturbed.

Oh, she looks simply precious. I could feel my morale surging. *I swear I'll deliver her safely to the southern capital!*

A fair-skinned beauty with long white hair and gold-and-silver eyes—the Leinster Maid Corps's number eight, Cordelia—approached me and whispered in my ear, "Emma, I got in touch with the Leinster mansion's staff. It sounds like they all made it out in one piece." We had joined up at the same time and spoke freely with each other.

"Understood. Thank goodness." I breathed a sigh of relief.

Now, if we can only get clear of the city ourselves—

"Hm? Th-The palace!" Miss Fosse shrieked.

We all stared down at the same sight. Ribbons of smoke were rising from the royal palace. Broken spires attested to fierce fighting, which was apparently still ongoing. Intercepted magical communications revealed that the forces flooding into the palace included the cream of the rebel crop—the Violet Order, under the command of the grand knight Haag Harclay. The royal guard was formidable and the royal family's personal bodyguards renowned, but they were vastly outnumbered. It was only a matter of time until the palace fell.

"Emma, ma'am, we're being pursued," Bella, a Leinster maid with short brown hair, reported. She had been dispatching little magical birds while standing guard. Taxing her mana since early morning had left her visibly fatigued—controlling magical creatures for extended periods of time was a grueling task, even for an expert sorceress. Not everyone could be Mr. Allen.

"How many soldiers, and how are they equipped?" I asked.

"About fifty light cavalry. No infantry or sorcerers. I suspect they're organized for mobility."

"Hm... Bella, recall your birds. Keeping them out any longer will be bad for your health."

"No! I...I'm fine! I can still keep going!" the girl protested. At fifteen, she was the youngest maid here.

"None of that. Mr. Allen charged me to make all of your safety my top priority, and I don't have the courage to take a scolding from him."

After a tense silence, Bella finally said, "Yes, ma'am."

"You've done well. Leave the rest to us." I gave her a pat on the shoulder. We would never have gotten clear of the city so easily without her help. Then, I turned back to the young head clerk, who looked perfectly darling even when she was frantically gulping water from a flask. "Miss Fosse, there seem to be pursuers on our track. Hurry ahead with the rest of the maids; I'll guard our rear. Cordelia, I temporarily transfer command to you."

"Understood."

"Emma?!" Miss Fosse's eyes widened behind her glasses as she rose to her feet. "I...I won't let you put yourself in danger like that!"

"I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine," I said. "Despite appearances, I'm—"

"Have no fear, Miss Fosse," a voice suddenly interrupted. "I'll join her in the rear guard."

"Sally?!" Miss Fosse exclaimed. "B-But..."

The nonchalant offer came from a maid in service to the Ducal House of Howard. Her blonde hair stopped at her ears, she wore spectacles, and she had a large bosom despite her petite figure. Her expression seemed unreadable at first glance, but she was far too stubborn to dissuade quickly.

There's no sense fighting her.

"This is our best course of action now," I said, clasping the lovely Miss Fosse's hands. "Don't worry on our account. We'll catch up to you in no time."

Her limpid eyes betrayed inner turmoil. I was a houseless immigrant from the southern isles, dark of hair and skin, yet this kind young lady harbored no prejudices against me. At last, she nodded. "I understand. But promise me that you'll both catch up to us soon. I'm asking you as a friend, not as Allen & Co.'s head clerk!"

"We promise," Sally and I answered in unison, smiling. Miss Fosse's kindness warmed my heart.

"All right, then. Get ready, everyone!" I commanded the maids.

"Always stay on the move," Sally added.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Huh? What? Whaaat?! H-Hang on! Emma?! Sally?!" As four maids swiftly hoisted Miss Fosse onto their shoulders and broke into a run alongside the others, she looked back and shouted, "Please...Please catch up to us soon! We'll be waiting for you up ahead! I promise we will!"

She truly is a gentle soul.

We nodded and waved to her.

Once Miss Fosse and the others were out of sight, I turned to the deadpan, bespectacled maid beside me and said, "What were you thinking, Sally? I hate to lighten Miss Fosse's guard."

"What did you expect?" she replied. "I can't let you be the only one to show off."

"Is that what they taught you in the Howard Maid Corps?"

"I believe his letter read, 'If, by any chance, the worst should happen in the royal capital, I positively forbid you to act alone. That goes for you too, Emma, Sally.'"

I groaned. She had me there. Mr. Allen's letters from the eastern capital had included several directions for us that Miss Fosse wasn't to know about.

Sally appeared emotionless. She was merely toying with the arms of her spectacles. But I could tell—she was smirking! What an unpleasant person!

I sighed. "I always suspected that he was overprotective, but now I'm certain of it. And not even we are exempt."

"I concur," Sally said, folding her arms and nodding. "But I'm glad of it. I doubt there are many maids feebler than me, yet gentlemen all act frightened of me for some reason." Her expression remained impassive, although she gave a quizzical tilt of her head. Was the way her posture emphasized her chest meant to antagonize me?

"As to you being feeble, I beg to differ," I responded, feeling vexed after a glance at my own bosom, "but I appreciate his concern as much as you do. Especially as no one would ever mistake me for a native of this kingdom."

"Your hair and skin are lovely," Sally said, scrutinizing me with an expression that seemed to ask why I had bothered stating anything so obvious. She was always truthful at times like this.

"Thank you," I responded, slightly embarrassed. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Allen complimented me on them just the other day."

"Why, Emma, don't tell me you've fallen for him." The inexpressive young woman made a show of covering her mouth in surprise. "Oh my."

"Don't you 'Oh my' me!" I snapped. "Or at least try to put some feeling into it! I merely thought that Miss Fosse certainly has her work cut out for her. After all, she'll need to contend with not only Lady Lydia, but also Lady Stella and— Is something the matter?"

Sally was staring northward into the distance with an inscrutable look on her face. "My pigheaded elder brother always fancied Lady Stella," she said, adjusting her glasses. "And I hear he's been made her personal butler. I can't shake the feeling that, even as we speak, he's struggling fruitlessly despite cruel reality staring him in the face."

"Oh." I could feel the same inscrutable expression spread across my face as well.

Lady Stella Howard was Miss Fosse's best friend—and romantic rival. Among the Leinster Maid Corps, it was whispered that she might even stand a chance of dethroning Lady Lydia if matters went on as they had been.

"Your brother must be uncommonly daring," I told Sally. "He has my sincere respect. As his sister, shouldn't you return to the north to cheer him on?"

"I don't have time to waste on odds that long," she replied. "And I wouldn't dream of obstructing Lady Stella's romance. Our young ladies are quite as lovely as yours, you know—a saint and a fairy. My posting to the royal capital is still a secret, so I'm looking forward to seeing them again."

"I quite agree that they're both charming."

I pictured the faces of Lady Stella and her younger sister, Lady Tina. Their lessons with Mr. Allen—Lady Tina and Lady Lynne frolicking together while Miss Walker looked on—were a relaxing sight.

"My grandmother—our head maid, Shelley Walker—told me privately to treat Mr. Allen's instructions as though they came from her or her husband, Graham," Sally said and threw out her chest, reminding me of our number three. "He saved our dear little Lady Tina, and Lady Stella as well. I'm deeply indebted to him."

"So am I," I responded. "Anna—our head maid and my mentor—gave me strict orders to follow Mr. Allen's directions! I'm determined to repay him for saving Lady Lydia, and I'm personally indebted to him as well." I paused. "We immigrants see our own dreams in him. He gives us hope that even we and the beastfolk and the houseless can achieve better lives."

“Then acting alone is out of the question,” Sally said earnestly.

After a brief silence, I decided not to argue. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Just then, a crack appeared in Sally’s poker face—she smiled.

“Oh, it appears we have company,” I said, also sensing the mana.

“Yes, although they’re rather worse for wear.”

Twenty-some lancers galloped up the slope. Our traps had thinned their ranks considerably. But rebels though they were, they had done well to break through at all—the head maid had personally instructed me in the art of laying snares. The knights were evidently cautious, because they stopped at a safe distance when they spotted us and began preparing offensive, defensive, and enhancement spells.

“I am Viscount Zad Belgique!” a large, bearded man in armor and helmet bellowed from the rear of the group. “I take it you women are in service to the Ducal House of Leinster. Resistance will do you no good. Surrender quietly, and I promise you leniency!”

Viscount Belgique was, if I recalled correctly, an eastern nobleman relatively well known for his monster-slaying exploits. But really, a viscount?

“That could have gone better,” I said, sharing a dejected look with Sally.

“I’d hoped for an earl at the very least,” she responded.

We both shrugged.

A mere viscount? What a failure of judgment! How could they think so little of Miss Fosse?

“Well,” I said, nodding to Sally, “he must know *something*.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” she agreed, nodding back.

“Wh-What impudence!” the viscount barked. “Didn’t you hear me?!”

I gave him a glacial look and said, “Be quiet.”

“And, if possible, contact someone holding at least the rank of earl,” Sally added.

The viscount’s face flushed crimson with rage. “Seize those women!” he roared.

“Yes, sir!” Nine knights immediately spurred their horses toward us.

“I’ll take the vanguard,” Sally announced, focusing mana into her arms and legs as she sprinted forward.

"Very well," I responded as I, too, prepared for battle.

Confusion appeared on the knights' faces, but still they charged on. The lead rider mercilessly thrust his lance at Sally—a splendid strike. He had skill. Nevertheless...

The knight's face twisted in shock as he cried, "What nonsense is—"

"Insults say more about the speaker than the spoken to. At least, that's the prevailing notion," the bespectacled maid said without a hint of emotion as she casually seized the point of the lance and crushed it with her bare hands. Then she leapt, slamming a kick into one of the lead knights' armor. The man went flying off his horse, and Sally kicked off his saddle to give chase. With a sharp cry, she drove her magically charged little fist into the airborne knight, smashing him into the ground. The downed knight groaned as his helmet flew off and his armor shivered to pieces. Sally landed beside him, looking smug.

Yikes.

I shuddered slightly. Meanwhile, the remaining knights charged me—until an easy wave of my hands unseated the startled riders and left them hanging in midair. Their steeds galloped away.

"Catching lances and smashing breastplates barehanded?" I said to Sally, with an exaggerated shake of my head. "No wonder gentlemen fear you."

"I'm certain that the average person would find a maid whose mysterious attacks incapacitate eight riders at once far more horrifying," she retorted. "Oh, I'm s-so scared. I can't stop tr-trembling with t-terror."

We shared a giggle, but our smiles did not reach our eyes.

Good grief! What a rude maid. And was that last bit her impression of Miss Walker? It was spot on, even though she never dropped her poker face, but that only makes me madder.

In the meantime, the knights had fainted, so I released the magically concealed black threads with which I'd bound them and let them tumble to the ground. As our head maid always said, "Focus on applying pressure to the entire enemy force."

"Name yourselves! I can tell you're no ordinary maids!" Viscount Belgique shrieked. He still had some fight left in him.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I replied. "How could I neglect to introduce myself?"

"Emma," Sally cautioned me, "my angelic cousin is the only clumsy maid the world needs."

I gave her a reproachful stare. This disagreeable maid just *had* to have the last word. Then, I curtsied and said, "My name is Emma, and I hold the post of number four in the Leinster Maid Corps."

"And I am Sally Walker, number four in the Howard Maid Corps."

"Did you say Walker?!" Viscount Belgique cried. He and his remaining knights blanched. Graham "the Abyss" Walker apparently had quite a reputation, even in the east.

I shot a smug look at the bespectacled maid, who for once wore a sour expression.

"It's old stories of grandpa they're scared of, not me," she grumbled.

Tee hee hee. Sally really must be doomed to inspire fear in gentlemen. Her pretty face and buxom bosom can't change that!

"Are we done here?" I asked, flashing a smile at the viscount. "If so, I suggest you tell us everything you know, and I do mean *everything*."

"O-Oh dear," Sally chimed in, taking the opportunity to get in another dig at me with her Miss Walker impression. "Y-You're scaring me, Emma. I'm quivering with fright!"

I pressed a hand to my forehead, then deployed my invisible black threads over the whole vicinity. The deadpan maid clenched her fists as she focused her immense mana into her limbs.

"I asked you to at least put some feeling into it!" I snapped, sighing. "Time to finish this!"

"Yes," Sally said, "let's make this quick and earn a compliment from Miss Fosse."

Chapter 1

"Damn it! What's happening in the royal capital?! Is His Majesty safe?! How could the Algrens launch a coup?" The man across from me groaned. His hair was platinum with a tinge of azure, and he wore a look of anguish.

"Walter, we've no time to waste grousing," said the scholarly man sitting on the sofa with his legs crossed. "We must face facts. Don't you agree, Stella?"

"Yes, Professor," I replied and nodded, then lowered my gaze to the floor. "But the fact is that we don't have enough information."

We were in the duke's office in the Howard estate on the outskirts of the northern capital. The frustrated man was my father, Walter Howard, one of the Four Great Dukes, and the scholarly gentleman was the professor, his close friend and one of the kingdom's foremost sorcerers.

"Algren rebellion! Royal capital, palace taken! His Majesty's safety uncertain!" read the terse but undeniably ill tidings that had reached the northern capital the previous night. One of my house's retainers had sent it using a communication spell after narrowly escaping the royal capital.

The rebellion had broken out on Darknessday. This was only Waterday, and there were still many gaps in our knowledge. The situation seemed convoluted.

My father, the professor, and our head butler, Graham Walker, who kept a respectful distance, would decide the ultimate response of the Ducal House of Howard. I, Stella Howard, would normally have no place in their deliberations, but a remark from the professor had abruptly changed that.

"Walter," he had said, "Stella is your heir. An experience like this will do her good. I'm certain that Allen would say the same."

And so, here I was, while my younger sister, Tina, and her personal maid, Ellie, waited in their rooms. I hadn't been able to tell them anything yet, although I would need to once we decided how our house would act. In retrospect, the mark of the great spell

Frigid Crane, which had appeared on the back of Tina's hand last Lightday night, might have been warning us of this disaster.

"Graham, you must have some new intelligence!" my father snapped.

"Unfortunately not," Graham replied, shaking his head. Seeing him like this brought home to me how closely he resembled Roland Walker, my personal butler for the summer. But Roland had yet to develop Graham's composure—he had responded to news of the rebellion with a flustered "Impossible!" Not that I was in any position to judge him for that.

I stroked the black cat on my lap—Anko, the professor's familiar—as I recalled the previous night. I had been extremely agitated when our head maid, Shelley, had given me the news late in the evening. An Algren uprising meant danger to my best friend, Felicia Fosse, and my house's retainers in the royal capital, as well as my other best friend, Caren, and Mr. Allen in the east. Mr. Allen was my tutor, and I cared deeply for—

"Let's review what we do know," the professor said. With a wave of his hand, he conjured a map of the kingdom and its neighbors in the center of the room.

Mr. Allen used light magic like this too!

Five points of light then appeared on the map of the kingdom. The one that was almost dead center was the royal capital, while the remaining lights marked the capitals of the four duchies in the north, east, south, and west. All glowed white, except for the dark point marking the eastern capital.

"The Ducal House of Algren, which governs the easternmost of our kingdom's Four Great Duchies, has united the conservative nobility in a rebellion against the Royal House of Wainwright's push for meritocracy," the professor explained. "They call it the 'Great Cause.' The Violet Order and other Algren troops conducting maneuvers near the royal capital have captured the city. We still don't know whether His Majesty or the rest of the royal family are safe."

The royal capital darkened. Railroad lines and air lanes then appeared on the map, which split into light and dark sections to reflect the balance of power. Every key point in the eastern and central regions had fallen into rebel hands.

"The royal capital is the hub of our kingdom's transit networks, including railroads, griffins, and wyverns. Its fall cuts us off from the other ducal houses." The professor took a breath. "Once they began their assault, they must have stopped a great number of letters and packages in the royal capital. That explains why we haven't been receiving mail by griffin or wyvern. I should have noticed something was amiss then—the Skyhawk Company takes great pains to ensure that their griffins deliver on time."

We had written to Mr. Allen in the eastern capital but received no reply. Reports had blamed foul weather, but...

If only I had realized sooner!

"Likewise, we can't reach the royal capital by telephone, and magical communications are being jammed over a vast area." The professor stood up and pointed to two circles in the east of the kingdom that had turned neither white nor black. "Based on our incomplete information, Marquesses Gardner and Crom appear to be holding themselves aloof and waiting to see which way the wind blows. They probably plan to back the winning horse. The only silver lining is that the rebel forces haven't moved since they occupied the royal capital. The Algrens specialized in defending the eastern border, so I suspect they're experiencing logistical issues."

"What do you suppose Gerhard Gardner is up to?" my father asked slowly.

Gerhard Gardner was the leader of the court sorcerers. He had been known as a hard-line aristocrat before the rebellion, so there was every possibility that he would collude with the Algrens. But the professor's reply was matter-of-fact.

"He's guarding His Majesty."

"Why do you think so?" my father pressed.

"Because he's a patriot, after his fashion," the professor said. "Suppose—just suppose—that Gardner defected and slew His Majesty and the royal family. What then?"

"We would have unimpeachable grounds to put down the rebel army," Graham interjected icily, without a hint of his usual grandfatherly demeanor. He was dispassionately stating his opinion as Duke Howard's spymaster. "In that case, the throne would likely pass west to His Majesty's younger brother or nephew. And the new king would have the support of the Ducal Houses of Howard, Leinster, and Lebufera."

"Naturally, the Algrens would proclaim one of their own king or elevate a puppet," the professor added, "but they could never escape the infamy of usurpation. Gardner is no fool. He knows better than to take action—at least for the present."

My father closed his eyes, looking distressed. After a few moments, he gloomily pronounced, "Under normal circumstances, I would dispatch troops to the royal capital at once. But that isn't possible."

"No wonder the Yustinian Empire is conducting military exercises along our northern border," the professor said. "They're in league with the rebels. Graham."

"I exterminated all the imperial 'rats' I'd left at large in the duchy as soon as the report arrived. They had very little to say for themselves, but I did gather one bit of intelligence—the Yustinian crown prince is in command."

Graham's words hung in the air for a moment.

"The crown prince, you say?" my father repeated.

"Well now," the professor mused. "The empire is in earnest."

Both men's eyes narrowed as a dreadful gloom pervaded the room.

The Yustinian Empire had been conducting a massive military exercise along the border of Galois, a region that my house had won from them in one of our northern campaigns. The identity of the imperial commander had been shrouded in mystery, but never in my wildest dreams had I imagined the crown prince himself was leading the operation. I cracked under the pressure and hugged Anko.

As...As things stand, we'll never be able to march on the eastern capital—to save Caren and Mr. Allen!

"The same is probably true of the aggressive moves that the League of Principalities has been making in the south." The professor sighed. "Walter, Graham."

"Yes?" both men replied.

The professor remained silent, resting a hand on his chin. His eyes were frighteningly intelligent. Then, he sat up straight and declared, "What a bother. Let's crush them."

"Professor?" my father said, startled.

"What do you mean by that?" Graham asked.

"Precisely what I said." The professor raised his hands in a theatrical gesture. He seemed comical at first glance, but I recognized his rage. He was furious at the rebels, at the empire, at the League of Principalities...and, above all, at himself. "The empire is in our way, so let's crush it, thoroughly and without mercy. Let's beat them so badly that they can't even cry about it and then leave them to, say, fight one of those civil wars they're so fond of. Just as we did over fifty years ago."

"Professor," my father said slowly, "don't ask the impossible."

"Impossible? Impossible, Walter? If you honestly mean that, then peace has blunted your fangs, Wolf of the North."

My father glared fiercely at the professor. "What do you mean by that?!" he barked as, in his anger, his mana leaked out and scattered ice crystals through the air.

"Allen suspected Algren treason," the professor continued, unfazed. "I'm certain he warned you as he did me. And, after having their stores of matériel investigated, you denied the possibility. Am I wrong, Graham?"

"You are quite correct," Graham slowly replied. My father remained silent.

"Mr. Allen guessed?!" I exclaimed, letting go of Anko to cover my mouth as I gasped.

It...It couldn't be. Mr. Allen had foreseen this disaster, and we had failed to heed him?

The professor grimaced and tapped his finger on a long, thin, black box that rested on the table. "You and Liam are better off—you have less to reproach yourselves with," he said. "But Allen laid out his fears to the old one—Lord Rodde, the Archmage—and me in person at the station in the eastern capital, and we dismissed them. We laughed and told him that no document the Algrens forged could ever fool us. We even took Gerard's fire dagger from him. If only we'd at least left him this weapon, which must have belonged to some great sorcerer of antiquity! But some part of us couldn't believe that one of the Four Great Dukes would do such a thing, and so none of us took his warnings seriously!"

He paused briefly, then continued in a calmer tone. "We've embarrassed ourselves for all the world to see. I don't care for my reputation, of course, and I won't lament any harm to it. Nevertheless"—darkness blotted out every last ice crystal; the professor's regret was intense—"after acting such utter fools, we've no right to waste time twiddling our thumbs. We ought to make up our minds immediately. Especially because...because I know Allen. I'm certain that he's done something reckless in the eastern capital. That boy could never stand idly by and watch as helpless people come to harm. He wouldn't hesitate to give his life to defend the weak. Do you understand me, Walter, Graham? That’s who the Brain of the Lady of the Sword is—a seventeen-year-old child. By all rights, we should be protecting him.”

My father and Graham silently mulled over the meaning of the professor's words: "He's done something reckless in the eastern capital."

Yes, I'm certain he has. That's just what Mr. Allen—my magician—would do. And however strong he may be, his safety is far from assured.

Tears blurred my vision. The sudden, forceful reminder of a reality that I had tried to ignore shook me. Then, without warning, Anko licked my hand. The familiar, it seemed, was trying to comfort me.

"In the first place, Walter," the professor said with a sigh, "remember all that Lydia and Allen have accomplished. The kingdom owes them for repelling a black dragon, slaying a four-winged devil and a pure-blooded vampire, and much, much more. If we pass up this chance to repay our debts, we won't even be able to keep up with the interest. Above all...there's the matter of the cursed children. The Leinsters and Howards are both deeply indebted to that boy."

"You're right," my father said slowly. "Yes, you're right. Graham!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Cursed child" was a derogatory term for children incapable of spellcasting. Tina had been called that behind her back until just a few months ago.

"Lydia" was Lady Lydia Leinster, also known as the Lady of the Sword. She was beautiful, almost unrivaled in the kingdom as both a swordswoman and a sorceress...and stood by Mr. Allen's side. Meeting him had allowed both her and Tina to gain a command of magic and put the name of "cursed child" behind them. Still, something didn't sit right with me. We were certainly in Mr. Allen's debt, but was that really enough to shape the decisions of a ducal house?

"I hereby declare a state of war across the whole duchy, effective immediately! Summon the heads of every northern house!" my father commanded Graham. "I'll consider anyone who drags their feet my enemy!"

"Certainly, sir. Might I make a request?"

"Name it."

"Please leave logistics to my wife." Graham smiled icily. "And permit me to stretch my legs a bit."

"Granted," my father replied. "You have carte blanche. Be thorough."

Shelley, in charge of logistics?

"Oho." The professor smiled, ignoring my confusion. "Then the kingdom's finest military logistician, Shelley 'the Mastermind' Walker, and its most feared spymaster, Graham 'the Abyss' Walker, will be acting in concert? This should prove amusing. Oh, Walter. I have an idea."

"What now?" my father asked.

"I suggest you assign Tina to Shelley's command."

"What?" my father and I blurted out in unison as we turned shocked stares on the professor.

"Listen closely, Walter. And you too, Stella," the great sorcerer said with perfect self-possession. "Young Tina possesses talent to rival Lydia's. Allen, of all people, dubbed her a genius."

I felt the slightest of pangs in my heart. Even so, I was glad to hear my sister held in such high esteem.

"He and Lydia have encountered all manner of accomplished warriors and sorcerers in the past four years, and my department has no shortage of promising youngsters," the professor continued. "But Allen never once called any of them a genius. That ought to give you some idea of Tina's potential. It would be a crime to waste her talent."

My father closed his mouth and folded his arms. At length, he said, "That's for Tina to decide, but I won't let her anywhere near a battlefield!"

"Naturally," the professor responded, nodding as he picked up a notebook and tore a page from it. "I merely believe that we ought to let her shine in the rear echelon. This is education, Walter. All for the children's own good. I seem to have picked up some of Allen's bad habits. In any case, I'll send Anko to the western capital posthaste. Using its darkness magic to travel, it should arrive in less than a day. Once there, it will confirm the safety of the royal family and then proceed to the southern capital, where it will attempt to establish communications with the Leinsters."

My father's and Graham's eyes widened.

What does he mean?

Anko cast a sidelong glance at my startled face as it descended to the floor. The familiar then took the folded sheet of paper from the professor in its mouth, surveyed its surroundings, and let out a single meow. With that, it vanished into darkness.

Gone already?!

"His Majesty and the rest of the royal family were most likely evacuated to the western capital, as is standard procedure in the event of an emergency," the professor calmly explained. "The knights of the royal guard were in shambles after that business in the east, but the royal family still have their personal guards and the court sorcerers—assuming the latter haven't defected. Most importantly, Royal Guard Commander Owain Albright was in the royal capital. He isn't known as 'the Immortal' for nothing, and he can go toe to toe with Lydia at close quarters. And we mustn't forget Princess Cheryl. She was a classmate of Allen's and Lydia's, remember." His affected manner of speaking elicited shrugs from my father and Graham and a chuckle from me.

Then, a thought struck me. Given how uneasy these tidings made me feel, what must they have done to her?

"Professor," I said, "how do you think Lydia is taking this?"

"She's a lost cause," the great sorcerer replied with an exaggerated shake of his head.

"S-Surely it's not that simple."

"Lydia is absolutely hopeless without Allen. We're just lucky that she's with her family. She won't go haring off to the eastern capital with Lisa around to keep her in check."

I wasn't entirely convinced, but I didn't argue the point.

Will she really be all right? I wondered. *I know how intensely she feels for Mr. Allen.*

Reluctantly, my father said, "As for breaking the news to Tina and Ellie..."

"Father, allow me," I interjected.

"If you would, Stella."

"I will."

After the terse exchange, the professor clapped his hands.

"Well then," he said, "we all have our work cut out for us, so let's get to it. The imperial ambassador will be setting a date and time for our meeting any moment now."

*

After leaving the study, I made straight for the detached greenhouse, certain that Tina and Ellie would be in their room inside. On my way, I exchanged a few words with the maids and other servants tending to the plants. All the praise they had for Tina warmed my heart. Everyone loved her—and I was no exception.

"Lady Stella," one remarked, "you look so like the mistress."

"Her spitting image," added another.

Am I really? I certainly hope so.

Then, Tina's room came into view. She had a chamber in the main house, of course, but it seemed to me that she had spent more of her time in the greenhouse over the past few years, ever since she had taken up her botanical and agricultural research.

"Tina, Ellie, I'm coming in," I said, opening the door and stepping inside. "What on earth?"

No sooner had I crossed the threshold than I sensed powerful mana, and whirling ice blossoms filled my view.

Is this whole room enclosed in...a military ice-resistant barrier?!

Looking farther inside, I saw eight candles arranged on the table. Atop each of them bloomed a flower of ice, all of which grew larger as I watched.

Before the table were two girls. One wore a snow-white ribbon in her hair, which was platinum with the faintest tinge of azure, and a white, short-sleeved blouse and skirt. This was my younger sister, Tina Howard. She was holding our mother's rod and attempting to control a spell.

The other, blonde and wearing a maid's uniform, was taller and more developed than Tina. This was her personal maid and—in a manner of speaking—my other little sister, Ellie Walker. Her grandparents were our head butler, Graham, and head maid, Shelley.

Tina let out a groan. "I...I don't understand it," she muttered. "Th-This isn't how it's supposed to work."

"L-Lady Tina, r-rein in your mana!" Ellie wailed, panicking. "Y-You'll make a hole in the roof!"

"I...I know that! Ellie!"

They were apparently practicing spell control, but if left unchecked... I drew my rapier and wand.

"L-Lady Tina!" Ellie cried as the flowers kept growing, straining the military barrier to its limits. "P-Please handle your spells with more delicacy! W-We'll be in really, really big t-trouble if this keeps up!"

“I’m t-trying!” Tina shouted. “B-But it’s harder than— Ah.” Her control of the spell formula slipped. A blizzard sprang up, freezing everything in the room as the flowers of ice rapidly expanded.

I swung my rapier, casting the advanced spell Imperial Snow Blade, which projected my sword stroke to sever the ice flowers at their roots. That done, I used my wand to envelop Tina and Ellie in the experimental triple-elemental spell Radiant Icewind Wall. The indoor blizzard still raged, although gradually shrinking until it finally subsided. A wave of my wand cleared away any lingering ice.

That went well.

I exhaled and sheathed my weapons. Then, I walked up to the awestruck girls, planted my hands on my hips, and launched into a scolding.

“I hope you realize how dangerous that was, Tina! And Ellie, you ought to have stopped her.”

Both girls squeaked in fright. Tina stammered, “S-Stella, you see...” while Ellie joined in with a faltering “L-Lady Stella, um, I mean...”

“Don’t make excuses,” I said. “What do you say when you’ve done something wrong?”

“We’re sorry,” they dejectedly replied in unison.

“That’s right!” Smiling, I asked, “Were you practicing magic?”

“Exactly!” Tina said, her forelock standing bolt upright. “Mr. Allen taught us this exercise!”

“W-We wondered how well we could do now,” Ellie added. “Lady Tina said that making just one would be boring. I’m g-glad we set up that barrier!”

“What do you mean by that, Ellie?” Tina demanded, glaring at the other girl.

“Y-You came *this* close to making a hole in the roof! Mr. Allen would have scolded us!”

“W-Well...” Tina groaned.

Their friendly banter soothed my fraying nerves. But when I lowered myself into a vacant seat, they froze and gave me sullen looks.

“Stella, that’s Mr. Allen’s chair!” Tina fumed. “Why do you always take it?!”

“L-Lady Stella, that teat’s saken. Oh...” Ellie joined in, tripping over her words.

"It's just a coincidence," I said.

"You're lying!" Tina cried. "And you sounded a bit like Lydia just now! Please, no more! Wh-What am I to do if you start taking after the Lady of the Sword, that fanatical believer in the Church of Hogging Mr. Allen?! O-Oh, what a nightmare!"

"But this might be just the type of girl Mr. Allen fancies," I countered.

"Stella, you meanie! Humph!" Tina sat down, folded her arms, and turned her head to one side. Her forelock announced her anger.

Does my *hair do that when I'm with Mr. Allen?*

In the meantime, Ellie had cleared away the candles I had cut down and set out eight new ones. "I-It's my turn next!" she announced. Her clenched fists showed that she didn't lack enthusiasm. "I'll d-do my best! Just watch me!"

Ellie raised her hands toward the candles. Flowers of red, blue, brown, green, azure, black, and then white appeared.

Seven of the eight classical elements?!

"That's amazing, Ellie," I said, genuinely impressed. "You can even cast light spells now?"

"Y-Yes'm!" she replied, beaming. "I've been t-training hard to impress Mr. Allen!"

She adores him too.

Tina kept sneaking glances at the flowers, evidently self-conscious about Ellie's achievement.

"I suppose you'll need to put in a bit more effort," I told her, chuckling.

"I...I am trying," she said. "That attempt you saw was still better than I managed in my lessons here with Mr. Allen last winter! And I did it with eight at once!"

"Hm... Perhaps you ought to start with just one, then."

"J-Jeez! Not you too, Stella! Fine! Be that way, then! I'll still get Mr. Allen to teach me, even if I'm no good at spell control!" Tina pouted, her forelock now waving from side to side.

Ellie and I giggled. Soon, the tone of our conversation grew calmer and the room somewhat more peaceful.

"Tina, Ellie," I said again, sitting up straight, "I have something important to tell you."

"Stella?"

"Lady Stella?"

They looked puzzled.

I steeled myself and began, “Please listen calmly. You see...”

When I finished speaking, Tina and Ellie seemed less shocked than I had expected. They looked troubled, of course, but kept their cool. That said, both girls murmured Mr. Allen’s name with concern.

“We don’t know anything definite yet,” I said. “Graham is looking into matters as we speak. But don’t worry! Father would never turn his back on Mr. Allen, and neither would the professor.”

“Right!” they answered in unison.

They sounded so earnest that I couldn’t help asking, “Aren’t you worried?”

“Worried?” Tina and Ellie repeated. They didn’t seem to grasp my meaning.

“Yes. If—*if*, mind you—Mr. Allen is involved in this disaster...he’ll be facing an army of trained soldiers. I know he’s incredible, and that Caren is with him, but even so...”

“Don’t worry, Stella!” Tina said.

“You wouldn’t believe how strong Mr. Allen and Ms. Caren are!” Ellie chimed in.

They both looked me straight in the eye.

Oh, I see.

They simply had faith in Mr. Allen—total, unwavering faith. So did I, of course. I believed in him with all my heart. And I knew that my best friend, Mr. Allen’s sister, Caren, was far, far stronger than I was. Yet I couldn’t shake my feelings of vague apprehension. I could firmly believe that Felicia, who must have been in the gravest danger in the royal capital, was safe, but not Mr. Allen. Even so, I couldn’t let my unease spread to Tina and—

“Stella?”

“Lady Stella?”

Tina and Ellie called my name and peered closely at my face.

Oh no. I’m making them worry.

“Yes, you’re right,” I said, forcing myself to smile and nod calmly. “Mr. Allen and Caren are tough. All right, then; let’s focus on what we can do here! I’m sure you’ll have a lot to learn from Shelley.”

“Yes!” Tina shouted. “I’ll work hard to make sure everyone has delicious food to eat and to impress Mr. Allen!”

“M-Me too!” Ellie added. “I’ll do my best with Lady Tina!”

They were raring to go. And as their elder sister, I needed to get my act together.

“In that case,” I said, “I think I’ll try my hand at making flowers too. I won’t let you show me up.”

That evening, back in my own room, slumber eluded me. Tina and Ellie were sound asleep in my bed, hand in hand. They had insisted on spending the night with me. None of us had ever experienced a real war, so they must have been nervous.

Outside, clouds hid the moon and stars, and the night was dark. I sat in a chair by my window, reading the second notebook that Mr. Allen had sent me by the light of a small lamp. Just a few days ago, my heart would have leapt with joy at the mere sight and feel of his writing. But not now. My tears dripped onto the pages, leaving blots. That wouldn't do. I wiped my eyes. I had been stuck in this cycle for some time, unable to make any progress.

The notebook detailed the new spells Pale-Azure Snowflakes and Eight Icicle Talons; fresh applications for the Azure Sword and Shield, the secret arts that Mr. Allen had gifted me; and an improved spell formula for Frost-Gleam Hawks, the new supreme spell that he had crafted for me. His gentle script read, "Sprouting wings will be a challenge, I'm sorry to say. I can't fathom how Lydia does it. But Tina managed it recently, and I'd love to see how you look with them, so I'll do my best to solve the mystery."

Mr. Allen. Mr. Allen! Mr. Allen*!*

I clenched my fists and bent forward, struggling to fight back sobs. Tina and Ellie were worried, but they still believed, almost blindly, that he would be all right. To them, Mr. Allen was a storybook hero. The hero always triumphs, and evil always falls. I shared in some of that feeling myself—never for a moment had I doubted Mr. Allen's truly incredible talents. And yet... I recalled a little of what he had said to me on the roof of the cathedral, overlooking the royal capital at night:

"People call me the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. It's an impressive nickname, but I'm nothing special. Unlike the Hero from the empire or the Lady of the Sword herself, I doubt I'll ever fulfill my childhood dream of becoming a storybook hero."

Mr. Allen, please, please *be safe! Mother, please protect the man I love!*

I prayed fervently in silence, clutching the sea-green griffin feather that Mr. Allen had sent me and the sky-blue ribbon that my mother had left me to my chest. All the while, I thought back to my mother's words, which Mr. Allen had helped me to remember that night on the cathedral roof:

"On nights when you can't sleep, be very quiet and watch the moon and stars. Then, the elementals will show you the way. There's nothing to fear."

I prayed and prayed, but I could glimpse no lights in the night sky.

*

Northern summers were fleeting, even in the capital of the Yustinian Empire, one of the two great powers in the west of our continent. Thus, where better to spend those brief seasons than in the innermost courtyard of the imperial palace? And as a decrepit emperor whose only value lay in remaining alive, reposing in our bed, which had been set beneath a stone roof, was our most important duty. Indeed, we idly reflected, an afternoon nap was the entertainment of the elderly. Ergo—

"Your Imperial Majesty! Your Imperial Majesty, Emperor Yuri Yustin, where may I find you?!"

An earsplitting roar jogged our drifting mind back to wakefulness.

Damn the man. So, he's caught wind of it already.

"Moss," we responded in an ill temper, "keep your voice down. We are enjoying our afternoon nap."

"Your Imperial Majesty, this is no time for relaxation!" retorted the boor who had stomped noisily into our courtyard—Grand Marshal Moss Saxe, the elderly supreme commander of our armies. He thought nothing of raising his voice to his emperor.

As always, Moss was fit as a fiddle—unlike us. He cut a splendid figure in his military uniform, and the sinister beauty of the enchanted sword Castle Breaker, which hung at his hip, remained undiminished. The fellow had gained gray hairs and wrinkles, but the years had done nothing more to change him.

"Such haste ill becomes an imperial grand marshal," we languidly replied. "What of the northeastern border?"

Our empire neighbored enemies on three sides. Assorted barbarians swarmed along our northern frontier. To our northeast lay the Lalannoy Republic—a gaggle of rebels who had broken from us a century prior. And in the south, we bordered the Wainwright Kingdom and its ever-vexing Duchy of Howard. We were on particularly bad terms with Lalannoy, due to the circumstances of its inception, and its recent efforts into the development of magical technology made the republic a force that we underestimated at our peril. Thus, the bulk of our armies, under the grand marshal's personal command, garrisoned the northeast...and must remain there. Although decades had passed without major conflicts, skirmishes were too numerous to remember. The demons, who held the far shore of the North Imperial Sea, also posed a serious threat, rendering the greater part of our navy likewise immobile. But at least they didn't desire war. Humans were far less reasonable.

"The Lalannoyan rebels are quarreling among themselves," Moss said, telling us nothing that we didn't know already. "This round of fighting seems intense, but we can't spare the resources to interfere. I'm more concerned with—"

"That Wainwright business?" we interjected.

"Your Imperial Majesty, we mustn't get embroiled in their mess. Halt the southern army at once!" Moss pleaded, approaching our person. Every word was just as we had predicted. The man was a rock of loyalty, although his speech was as uncouth as it was unsparing.

"How old are you, Moss?" we asked.

"Come again?" he replied, taken aback.

"Your age. How many years have you lived?"

"Seventy-two. What of it?"

"A regular spring chicken. We are seventy-three. More than fifty years have passed since we inherited our empire from our late brother, and we already have one foot in the grave. Many call us 'old hog' behind our backs. We doubt that we shall live to see next spring."

Our elderly grand marshal looked at us with disbelief. "Your Imperial Majesty," he said coldly, "you've been saying that for more than fifty years—although they called you 'the platinum hog' in the beginning."

"Oh, let us have our fun! This is the problem with old men who have lived too long!" We fumed and reached for a glass of ice water, which we drank.

We couldn't help being short as well as fat, and we weren't fond of riding horses. Our once-gorgeous platinum-blond hair had grown thin. 'Old hog' was a fitting moniker.

With a glance, we directed Moss to have a drink of water too.

Our grand marshal filled his glass and drained it without hesitation.

"Moss," we said.

"Yes?"

"We long to retire and devote our twilight years to the joys of napping. Mobilizing the southern army was Yugene's idea. He pondered over it, racking brains he doesn't have, and even taking the advice of dolts from who-knows-where before petitioning the throne. It would be...a pity to quash it out of hand. Fool or no, he is our only son."

We had long failed to sire children. Our first child had been born when we were past fifty, and that child—Crown Prince Yugene—had proved a failure. Although tradition, stretching back to the dawn of our empire, held that a Yustinian emperor must lead the charge in war, Yugene was a mediocre swordsman, bowman, and sorcerer—just as we had been. His academic attainments were also deficient. Nevertheless, he craved power.

We found it difficult to believe that the blood of the Archer, one of the legends who had brought an end to the strife that had consumed the continent five centuries ago, ran in his veins. Ultimately, he was our son. He would never measure up to our late brother's genius.

Yet all the other branches of our lineage could claim modest success. Once we breathed our last...our empire would soon fracture. In the aftermath, the Howards and Lalannoyans would carve up our territory.

"I appreciate your feelings on the matter," Moss said gravely, "but he's picked the wrong battle to fight. The Howards won't hesitate to sink their fangs into us if we antagonize them."

"We hear that the Wolf of the North is the only confirmed master of their supreme spell and secret art," we countered. "And their standing army is small—a mere twenty thousand troops against our southern army's two hundred thousand."

"Who's been filling your head with nonsense like— No, it doesn't matter. The Howards are not to be taken lightly, even if their magical talents have declined," our grand marshal pressed, forcing us to confront the harsh reality. "They defy common sense. The youngsters at general staff headquarters are convinced that they're quite capable of mounting campaigns in the dead of winter."

An army that could withstand a winter campaign bespoke overwhelmingly thorough logistical organization. None of our forces, with the exception of Moss's direct subordinates, approached their level of discipline either. Nevertheless...

"We suppose you're right," we said, nodding emphatically. "We...doubt that Yugene will triumph. He may even suffer a historic defeat."

"Then—" We shot our elderly vassal a glance before he could utter the word *why*. Our grand marshal and oldest companion knitted his brows. "Your Imperial Majesty, you can't mean..."

We surveyed our courtyard garden. The plants made the most of the northern summer, despite its brevity. When had our summer been?

"Should our predictions prove false, and the Howards have grown weaker than we imagine, then Yugene will win his war, and all will be well," we indifferently explained. "Wresting even a sliver of land from the kingdom in all this chaos would qualify as a victory over an undefeated dynasty. Wouldn't that be a feather in our boy's cap? Besides, the kingdom is our bulwark against the demons; we can't afford to weaken it too severely. But if even a weakened Duke Howard is still a 'god of war,' then so be it. No fool could hold the imperial throne against both an undiminished House of Howard and those Lalannoyan rebels. We have assigned our youngest granddaughter and your grandson to the headquarters of our southern army. Firsthand experience of how the Wolf of the North and his army fight will do them good."

"Princess Yana and Huss?!" Moss exclaimed. Then, gravely, he declared, "Your Imperial Majesty, whatever happens, the House of Saxe will defend Emperor Yuri Yustin."

He hadn't changed one bit. In the old days, back when we had rebelled against our brother, he had been our only ally.

"It could be a bloodbath," we warned him affectedly. "Just like over fifty years ago. After all...we may be forced to add filicide to fratricide, and to slay more of our kin besides—to say nothing of officers and men. And we'll end by crowning our sister-in-law's granddaughter empress. No doubt our deaths will be far from pleasant."

"Too late to worry about that." Moss grinned and thumped his chest. "Princess Yana is wise. We can rest easy with the future in her hands. That said, I'd rather avoid a tussle with the current Duke Howard and Walker 'the Abyss.'"

"Freaks, the lot of them. The world is hard on mediocre men like us. As we speak, our envoys must be conversing with the Wolf of the North in the kingdom's northern capital. Oh, that reminds us." We recalled the biggest freak of them all, who had paid us an unexpected visit a few days prior. Naturally, no ordinary person could slip into the inner sanctum of our imperial palace, but all safeguards were meaningless where she was concerned. "The Hero has gone to their northern capital as well."

For the first time in this conversation, our grand marshal truly lost his composure. "You mean that *she* has taken action?" he demanded in astonishment. "Are matters that serious?"

"Perhaps. We shared unconfirmed reports with her, but we mere mortals cannot hope to fathom the mind of a genuine living legend. Now, enough talk. We're going to sleep."

We dismissed Moss with an exaggerated wave of our hand. He performed a perfect salute and then departed. That salute of his hadn't changed since we were children, when this inner courtyard had been our prison and he had kept us company here.

"Few now know the secret of the Eight Great Elementals and the Eight Heresies," we mused, looking around us at eight massive, timeworn pillars. "Is that a victory for us self-professed 'heroes'? Or is it..."

A southerly breeze blew over our imperial capital. Even in summer, the wind was cold enough to chill our old bones.

*

The morning after I'd broken the news about Mr. Allen to Tina and Ellie, I returned to my room after breakfast to change my clothes. Father and I were going to meet the imperial ambassador.

I looked myself over in my full-length mirror. I wore my Royal Academy uniform. Shelley had offered me military garb, but that might intimidate the imperials. This was my father's negotiation to conduct; I needn't be conspicuous. Before putting on my beret, I straightened the silver wing-and-sword insignia that marked me as student council president.

There was still no word of Caren or Felicia. We remained utterly cut off from the other major cities of the kingdom, unable to communicate by griffin or wyvern mail, magic, or telephone. Although we were gathering intelligence from refugees fleeing the royal capital, whom we sheltered in the city, details remained elusive. We hadn't heard from Anko either, but if the professor's surmise proved accurate, we would learn the fate of the royal family before the day was out.

I opened a box on a nearby end table. It contained my treasure—the sea-green griffin feather that Mr. Allen had given me. I picked it up, clutched it to my chest, and prayed. I couldn't help feeling anxious.

What would I do if...if he were hurt? The mere thought almost brought tears to my eyes. I was beside myself with worry. After meeting that kind magician, I had grown amazingly strong—and incredibly weak. In the southern capital, Lydia must have been feeling as anxious as I did. More so, in fact. She might even—

No. I can't let myself go on thinking this way.

I slipped the feather into my breast pocket and lightly slapped my cheeks. "Stop it, Stella," I told myself, briefly shutting my eyes. "You're through weeping, remember? Times like this are just when you need to stand firm!"

Mr. Allen, please be safe.

I heard a knock.

"L-Lady Stella," said a nervous voice. "Are you there?"

"Ellie?" I replied. "Is something the matter?"

"P-Pardon me."

The door opened, and the maid entered. Tina was nowhere in sight. What brought her here? The day before, I had warned both girls to stay in their rooms until the ambassador left, just to be safe.

"Sh-She's not here either," Ellie said, groaning nervously as she looked around the room, bewildered.

"Tina?" I asked.

"That's right. She left her room earlier, and she still hasn't come back."

"Have you tried a tracking spell?"

Ellie hung her head. "I keep casting them, but it doesn't work."

Tina is blocking magical detection?

"I understand," I said, straightening my school beret and belting on my rapier and wand. "Everyone's busy, so let's look for her together."

"B-But Lady Stella, don't you have important business?"

"Nothing on earth is more important than my little sister. Especially"—I gave Ellie's forehead a gentle poke with my finger, just as Mr. Allen sometimes did—"when my other little sister needs help."

"Big Sis Stella," she said slowly, "you lound sike Mr. Allen..."

"Do I? Perhaps I'm gradually coming to resemble him. Now, let's go."

I left my room with a bashful Ellie in tow.

"Lady Stella, you haven't a moment to waste," the straitlaced, monocled young man waiting in the corridor said as soon as he caught sight of me. "Please proceed to the council hall at—"

"Roland, Tina seems to have gone missing." I interrupted him. "Ellie and I are going to look for her."

"Lady Tina has?" My personal butler for the summer adjusted his monocle, looking puzzled. "In that case, I shall join you in—"

"Would you search the house then? Ellie and I will check the greenhouse," I said, cutting him off again, and began walking. Earnest as he was, Roland would doubtless leave no nook or cranny unexplored.

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie responded. To my butler, she added, "Uh, um, R-Roland, please cheer up!"

After a tense silence, Roland said, "Miss Walker, sympathy can be cruel."

The heir to the Walker name groaned. Despite appearances, she was on good terms with her cousin.

"Come along, Ellie," I called, looking back.

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie scurried over to me.

Roland began walking as well, saying, "I shall let you know if I find her."

We stepped out of the connecting passage and into the greenhouse. When my father had first mentioned his plans to construct this building, I had never imagined anything so large. The plants within appeared considerably more varied than they had been when I had left for the Royal Academy. My sister never ceased to amaze me.

I would normally have expected to find someone tending to the plants, but there was no one in sight. Due to the imperial ambassador's visit, the house was on high alert.

Ellie and I looked around as we continued along the corridor.

"We have a lot of area to cover," I said. "I suppose we should start with Tina's room. Follow me."

"Y-Yes'm!"

A short walk later, I overheard a faint snatch of conversation. Ellie and I looked at each other, and I pressed a finger to my lips, signaling her to keep silent. A western tree grew nearby, and we stealthily peeked out from behind it.

There she is.

Tina sat on a large wooden bench up ahead. She was fishing a small jar out of a hamper that rested beside her and speaking animatedly to a girl seated on her other side. I didn't recognize her companion. Lights glittered almost protectively in the air around them.

The unfamiliar girl was about Tina's height, with a dainty, fragile build and a beautiful, doll-like face. Her clothes were mostly white, and an old sword hung at her waist in a jet-black scabbard. Judging by the color of her hair—platinum-blonde and tied with a gold ribbon—she hailed from the empire.

Tina was chatting happily with this mysterious beauty, but we were too far away to make out what she was saying...until Ellie silently cast an eavesdropping spell.

"...and this honey is from Galois! I get the beekeepers to experiment with all sorts of different flowers every year!" Tina was excitedly displaying the jar to her companion. Her hamper apparently contained honey harvested from across our duchy.

"Hm... It's a different color than I'm used to in the empire," remarked the stranger.

"Exactly!" Tina let out a smug laugh. "The color and flavor change depending on where it's harvested. Galois doesn't yield very much yet, but I'm hoping to increase production and turn it into a local specialty someday."

Since my return to our duchy, I had heard no end of stories about the plants that my sister had researched and grown. Locals had told me, "Lady Tina taught me about these fruits and vegetables," "Not to mention medicinal herbs," and "She even started widespread apiculture." Everyone sang her praises as though she were their own daughter or granddaughter. They cared deeply for her. And they worried. Other remarks included "Lady Tina isn't being bullied in the royal capital, is she?" "Lady Stella, please take good care of Lady Tina," and "Is that tutor of hers doing well?" I had been a little surprised that their interest extended to Mr. Allen.

"Markets within the duchy are limited," Tina continued, kicking her feet as her forelock swayed. "Ideally, I'd like to send some to the royal capital for sale to— Hey! Don't eat that without asking!"

"Mmm. Delicious," said her companion. "This is payback for those ice spells you shot at me out of the blue earlier."

"Th-That was your fault for wandering around in— Ahhh! Don't take so much!"

The girl ignored Tina's protests as she uncapped another jar and began licking the honey within. Then, she shifted her attention to my sister's chest and nodded emphatically. "I thought so. You're my comrade, Wolf Pup," she said. "So, what's yours is mine. And what's mine is mine."

"Y-You make that sound noble," Tina protested, "but shouldn't that make what's yours mine too?!"

"Of course not. The world is a harsh place." The girl threw out her chest, although she had no chest to speak of. What a childish argument.

"What?! Jeez!" Tina fumed, snatching the jar from her companion and licking it herself. "Oh, this tastes amazing."

"Mm-hmm. I told you so."

"I'd love to share some with my tutor," Tina said dreamily.

"Your tutor?" Like a little animal, the girl showed her puzzlement with a tilt of her beautiful head.

"Yes, I mentioned him to you earlier. He's ever so kind and dashing, and also just a little bit mean. But—"

"You like him?"

"Yes! More than anyone else in the whole wide wo—" Tina stopped herself as her face reddened before my eyes. Her forelock stood bolt upright, then slowly went limp, and she clapped her hands to her flushed cheeks and wriggled in embarrassment. She adored Mr. Allen with all her heart. And so did my other little sister, if her competitive glare was anything to go by.

"Don't make that face, Ellie," I whispered, chuckling. "You care a lot about Mr. Allen too, don't you?"

Ellie looked startled, then groaned and whispered back, "A-And so do you, right, Big Sis Stella?"

"You've got me there." I giggled, then we exchanged glances and smiled at each other. I found this idle banter calming.

"Mmm. That was fun," the unfamiliar girl said, shooting a tender look at Tina before getting off the bench. "I'm glad the plants called me here. You're smart and entertaining, Wolf Pup. You even gave me a glimpse of a spell formula I remember fondly. And although you're a bit chatty, you're my comrade! So, I'll give you a word of warning."

"Yes?" Tina said. "And I still have potential! Final victory will be mine!"

The girl shook her head slightly and breathed an ostentatious sigh. "You're done growing, Wolf Pup—your height *and* your chest. I'm not. Victory." She gave a smug little laugh.

"What?! How do you know that?! And stop calling me 'pup'! You're plenty small yourself!"

"Wolf Pup." Suddenly, the strange girl's tone changed, and a look of deep affection entered her eyes. "The fact that you can speak with me like this is a miracle in itself. Your good luck beggars belief. If the whole world started over, this wouldn't happen again. So"—she tenderly rubbed Tina's head with her little hand, a faint smile playing on her lips—"now that you've grasped your star, never let go. Never ever. You used up all your good luck, Wolf Pup. You won't get a second chance. This good-for-nothing world is harsh and cruel. But as long as you hold on to your star, it will never leave you. Understand?"

What star? Who could she— I suddenly pictured the face of the person I most longed to see, tenderly calling my name.

"Mr. Allen?" Ellie murmured beside me. She'd had the same idea.

Tina blinked in surprise, considered for a moment, and nodded. "Yes, I understand! Thank you so much. I'll do my best!"

"Mm-hmm. You're a good kid, Wolf Pup," said her companion. "Oh, and don't worry about the girl inside you. She's nice too." Then, the girl turned to Ellie and me with a hostile glare quite unlike the looks she gave Tina. She had apparently noticed us hiding. "My enemies over there shouldn't bother making an effort. Your bosoms are immodest. Truly deplorable."

"Th-That's not very nice!" Ellie protested, babbling in surprise.

"W-Was that called for?" I responded.

Once we stepped out from behind the tree, Tina exclaimed, "St-Stella! Ellie!"

"Tina," I said. "We've been looking for you."

"L-Lady Tina, you mustn't disappear like that!" Ellie added.

"I...I meant to be quick," Tina stammered, "but then everyone brought me honey, and I found this girl wandering around the greenhouse, so..."

But her faltering excuses failed to halt Ellie's irate advance. "I a-asked you to come right back!"

"Don't be mad, Ellie," Tina said. "L-Look, fresh honey! Would you like to make sweets with it?"

"Y-You won't distract me with— Oh, wow! It looks lovely! You have enough here to make all sorts of delicious treats!"

My little sisters were soon engrossed in lively conversation, just like old times. I was about to join in when a flash of light caught my eye.

"A daughter of Etherheart is a saint in the making, while the Wolf Pup is a cursed child who halted her curse by housing one of the Eight Great Elementals within herself," the strange girl murmured, passing by me without a sound or any other sign of her presence. "And you've met him. The world is so inscrutable. Saint Wolf, he's in your hands. Save him."

"What?" I asked slowly, mystified.

Me, a saint?

I quickly spun around, but the beautiful girl had disappeared.

"Oh, that reminds me," Tina said brightly, "I didn't ask your name, comrade! What should I call— Huh?"

"O-Oh, I don't see her anywhere," Ellie chimed in.

They stared around the greenhouse until Tina looked down at her hamper and cried, "Whole jars are missing!"

"Ellie, would you try to trace her with wind magic?" I asked. "I'll see what I can do using light."

"Y-Yes'm!"

Ellie cast a spell, and I used some of the light magic from my notebook, but the girl was nowhere to be found. Then, a thought struck me—we hadn't been able to locate Tina magically on our way here.

"Oh, and we were getting along so well!" my sister said dejectedly. "I had it all planned out too! Lynne, my comrade, and I would band together, with Caren as our honorary advisor, and defeat you two, Lydia, and Felicia!"

"L-Lady Tina, you've got a scary look in your eyes!" Ellie babbled.

Just then, someone walked into the greenhouse. "Stella, there you are. It's time. Tina, go back to your room. We can never be too prepared."

"Father," I said. "I understand."

"Oh, all right," Tina replied.

"Until later, then." Our father strode off toward the main house.

I turned to my sisters and stood up straight. "Tina, Ellie, we'll speak again later. I'm going to see the imperial ambassador with father. Tell Roland for me, would you?"

*

"Why, *Your Grace*. I sincerely appreciate your taking the time to discuss matters with me here today. I am Hughric Chaser, imperial ambassador plenipotentiary."

"I am aware," my father answered stiffly.

In the council hall, we had found a willowy, brown-haired dandy waiting for us. Behind him stood several more men, probably bodyguards. The thin man ran his lascivious gaze over me.

Disgusting.

If I recalled correctly, this was the same ambassador who had proposed to Lydia in the royal capital. And he had made a point of calling my father "Your Grace."

"Would you be so good as to introduce me to this ravishing young lady?" the man asked, staring at me.

My father waited a moment before responding, "My daughter Stella."

"Dear me! What a beauty she is. Splendid. Truly splendid."

The ambassador must have felt certain of his superiority, because his words oozed disdain and greed. I made no attempt to mask my loathing as I touched the feather secreted in my breast pocket.

Mr. Allen...

My father seated himself in a chair, then indicated with a glance that I should follow suit. Once I sat beside him, he addressed the ambassador.

"This is no child's errand. Please be brief."

"I suppose that would be your preference," the ambassador replied, "given that *His Highness*, the clear-sighted new Duke Algren has occupied your kingdom's capital. I hear that the former king and his family remain missing and that communication between your ducal houses is proving difficult. Disturbing rumors indeed."

The empire had been informed of the rebellion, just as the professor had predicted! They even insinuated ties to the Algrens.

After a pregnant pause, my father icily said, “I won’t beat around the bush—what does the empire want?”

“Then, I won’t mince words.” The ambassador narrowed his eyes like a serpent. “We wish you to withdraw your borders to the Lignier River.”

I nearly cried out in spite of myself. Retreating to the Lignier would mean negating the century-old outcome of the Northern War, relinquishing Galois and retreating behind the Azure Dragon Mountains!

“And if we refuse?” my father asked, his tone even more glacial.

“I understand. Yes, I comprehend perfectly!” the thin man cried, curling his lip and mocking us with grandiose gestures. “To your house, Galois is a bright land of victory! And—most lamentably—to my homeland, it is a site of bitter defeat. But that is precisely why His Imperial Majesty and His Imperial Highness, the crown prince, are not content to leave it in your kingdom’s grasp forever. Which reminds me of something I heard through the grapevine.” He raised his hands theatrically. Then, with his serpentine gaze fixed on me, he continued in a light, conversational tone. “Something about our southern army conducting exercises near your borders. Simply maneuvers, of course—the empire has no ulterior motive—but who can say what mischief some of our hotheaded young knights might get up to.”

My house was already aware of the imperial troops massing along our borders. And based on the professor and Graham’s analysis of their supplies, they were after more than just Galois. Beyond a shadow of doubt, the empire was bent on snapping up territory while the kingdom was in turmoil!

My father glared daggers at the slim ambassador, who grinned complacently.

“My, how terrifying,” the man said. “Such a ferocious look from the famed Wolf of the North leaves a mere ambassador such as myself too petrified to speak. Yet facing our southern army of two hundred thousand would prove rather a tall order for your house alone. What is the size of your standing army? Ten thousand? Twenty? Surely less than thirty thousand, even if you were to declare a general mobilization.”

He was right that our standing army was not large. We would undeniably find ourselves outnumbered. Nevertheless, my father would never swallow such outrageous—

"I understand your terms."

"Father?!" I exclaimed, turning to look at him in astonishment. His eyes shone with intelligence—and wrath.

"Wonderful!" the ambassador cried jubilantly. He had failed to spot what I had. "I knew that Your Grace would see reason! Now that we have an understanding, I'd like you to sign these papers at once. His Imperial Majesty has already approved—"

"Your Excellency appears to be laboring under a misunderstanding," my father said, cutting short the stream of talk.

"A misunderstanding, you say?"

"I do."

Despite the summer sunshine streaming into the hall, my skin felt cold.

"Who do you imagine sits before you?" my father asked the ambassador, folding his arms. His piercing stare cut right through Chaser, whose smug grin vanished as beads of cold sweat ran down his forehead. Then, boldly, my father declared, "My name is Walter Howard, protector of the kingdom's northern lands! I have never considered ceding territory without a fight. If your emperor wants land, tell him—"

I recalled what my father had told me before I had left for the royal capital: "The Four Great Dukedoms must be the guardian deities of our kingdom." Now, I could truly appreciate what he'd meant.

"—to come and take it!" my father roared.

The blood drained from the ambassador's face. After a moment of shock, however, he let out a nervous laugh. "Are you certain you can afford to take that tone with me?" he asked. "Do you imagine the imperial army is ignorant of your house's circumstances? You may have managed to pilfer Galois from us a hundred years ago, but you cannot stand alone against our armies now! You have no hope of victory in this—"

"'The Howards' cursed child'..." my father murmured, his expression sorrowful. I felt a sharp pang in my chest.

"Who is that?" asked the mystified ambassador. "Your Grace, we are in the midst of discussing—"

"This kingdom's aristocracy called my youngest daughter that behind our backs until not long ago," my father continued, ignoring him. "And no wonder—she couldn't cast so much as a single spell. Nobles without magic are easy targets for scorn here, and in the empire as well, no doubt. That holds doubly true for a member of a ducal house. 'Cursed child, cursed child,' they called her, without even knowing the true meaning of what they said."

"Y-Yes, but what does this have to do with—"

My father's ferocity knocked the ambassador out of his chair. The guards behind him gripped their sword hilts...then turned pale and looked down at their hands. Their swords were frozen in their scabbards.

"But all the people of our duchy loved her sincerely," my father continued quietly. "They called her 'our dear little lady.' And even if they never said so out loud, they knew that he saved her. They knew!" he roared, laying bare his dreadful fury.

Oh, father loves Tina so dearly.

"I refer to a young man who, when this disturbance broke out, most likely fought to the bitter end in the eastern capital, with no thought for his own safety," he continued in a calmer tone, as though he were trying to persuade the ambassador. "That is what he meant to my house, Your Excellency. If you do not grasp my meaning, ask your emperor—the matter touches your nation as well. That is why we are in haste—great haste—to put down these rebels and rescue our savior. What is our title worth if we leave our debts unpaid?! And yet, your nation insists on standing in our way. Therefore..." My father's fist smashed a dent in the table, his overflowing mana freezing the splinters of wood as they scattered. This was my first sight of Duke Walter Howard, guardian of the north, when he was truly determined. "You leave us no choice but to rend you with our fangs and leave your broken bodies on the battlefield. Don't take us lightly, boy!"

A blizzard filled the room. The imperial ambassador turned ghastly pale, and his bodyguards shivered.

My father turned to the door and growled, "*You* didn't have a hand in this farce, I trust?"

"The emperor just told me to be here," a voice replied. "Territory doesn't interest me. It's freezing. I hate ice and snow. Stop it."

"I beg your pardon." My father inclined his head and dispelled the blizzard.

Who would merit such consideration from a duke?

I shifted my gaze to the door and stammered, "What? But you're..."

There stood the lovely girl whom I had just met in the greenhouse, although I had noticed no sign of the door opening. My father's next words only added to my shock.

"It's been a long time," he said, not acknowledging my confusion. "What brings you here, Hero Alice Alvern? I don't believe that anyone here could affect the world profoundly enough to merit the use of your sword."

"Mm-hmm. This is just a tempest in a teapot," the girl bluntly agreed. "My sword isn't called for, so I can do as I please. The imperial army has numbers, but they're a flock of sheep. Even most of their commanders are sheep. I doubt they'll be a match for a pack of doggies with a wolf to lead them."

What? This girl is the Hero?! Like in all those fairy tales?!

I was more baffled than ever, but the girl didn't spare me a glance as she walked over, plunked herself down in an empty chair, and said, "Saint Wolf. Tea."

"Oh, o-of course," I responded. Before I knew what I was doing, I had handed her my own untasted cup. She certainly didn't *look* like a legend as she drank, muttering "hot" and blowing on the tea.

"L-Lady Alice, this is most improper!" the ambassador cried, panicked now that he had finally gotten over his shock. "Consider what your presence here signifies! As a vassal of His Imperial Majesty, you are duty bound to do your utmost for the empire's—"

Without warning, the slim man's legs buckled under him, as did his bodyguards' under them, and they all collapsed noisily to their hands and knees. A single glance from the girl had been too much for them.

"I'm not his vassal," she said without feeling. "I've just been in the empire a long time. I came here today because the elementals were making a fuss—and because the emperor mentioned there might be a new master of Blizzard Wolf. I'm satisfied now. Also..." Lightning flashed through the room, loudly shattering the ceiling lights, which disintegrated before they hit the floor. The girl's tone remained impassive. "I don't remember giving maggots permission to call me by name. I may not rule any land, but I'm Grand Duchess Alice Alvern. Even a grub like you should be able to figure out who outranks whom. Watch your tongue. Or would you rather die for your impertinence?"

The ambassador spluttered in pain on the floor. I shuddered, although I took care not to show it.

Was that magic? I couldn't even see a spell formula. And now the empire knows that Tina can cast Blizzard Wolf.

The old me would already have drawn her weapons, but no more. I surreptitiously touched the sea-green griffin feather in my breast pocket.

It will be all right. I'm Mr. Allen's student, and it will take more than a living legend to faze me!

"Should I use your title as well?" my father asked the girl as he calmly sipped his tea.

She turned her attention to me and said, "Mmm. Not bad, Saint Wolf. My comrade was right; you don't wag your tail for him for nothing. Snacks."

"Wag my tail"? I thought as I offered her a plate of pastries. *Tina, some things are better left unsaid, even if they are true. Still, am I imagining things, or does she know Mr. Allen?*

The Hero uncapped a small glass jar and slathered Tina's honey over her pastry. "Call me anything but my name," she answered my father. "More importantly, I have a few questions about my comrade."

"Your comrade?"

"She means Tina, father," I supplied. The Hero seemed to be quite taken with my sister.

My father nodded, and she continued. "My comrade has learned to cast Blizzard Wolf, as the emperor said, but you shouldn't send her to war. Her curse isn't broken, only stopped."

What curse? What is she talking about?

While I was lost in thought, the slender ambassador reached up and grasped the edge of the table. Pale-faced and breathing heavily, he nevertheless hauled himself upright and attempted to rejoin the conversation.

"A...A new wielder of supreme magic?! Lady Alice, that is vital —"

Another glance from the beautiful girl made him writhe and then topple over, foaming at the mouth.

"What you fear will not come to pass, Lady Hero," my father said as though nothing had occurred. "Tina is still only thirteen— too young for a battlefield. And I never want to send her off to war, even if she reaches adulthood."

"I was seven when I battled a dragon and killed a two-winged devil," the Hero responded, nonplussed. "Thirteen is more than old enough for battle."

"An impressive service record," my father remarked slowly.

The girl's casual tone left me speechless. Dragons and devils were known as the most vicious beings in existence, practically calamities in and of themselves. Fighting one was nearly impossible.

"How did my comrade suddenly master supreme magic?" the Hero asked, cutting straight to the heart of the matter.

"I thought you'd met her," my father replied. "My youngest daughter has been pushing herself relentlessly. And I hear that you're acquainted with Allen. That ought to tell you all you need to know."

"Mm-hmm. He does make a big difference, and I know my comrade is a hard worker. But"—the Hero paused, looking genuinely puzzled—"is that all?"

Tina's effort and Mr. Allen's guidance weren't enough to satisfy her as an explanation. What else was there? Tina *had* linked mana with Mr. Allen...

"I have no reason to lie," my father replied, shaking his head. "Besides, a supreme spell can't seem much different from any other magic in your eyes. Why are you so concerned?"

The Hero furrowed her brow as she scoffed her pastry. "Mmm. Delicious. You overestimate me. Supreme spells are somewhat annoying."

"Somewhat? They're beyond all but a few of the kingdom's sorcerers."

"Four bloodlines in one nation is a lot, compared to the rest of the continent."

"Naturally. We have the Dark Lord to our west."

The Hero puckered her lips. "You're wily, Wolf. I don't like you."

"Only because I'm surrounded by undesirable friends," my father said.

"I'm sure I wouldn't like them either. Well, I asked my questions, even if your answers are hard to swallow. You can fight your tempest in a teapot now." With that, she dropped the subject. Apparently, she really had come just to ask after Tina.

"Hero Alice," my father said hesitantly, "as for him..."

"Mm-hmm. I know," the Hero responded. Her beautiful face looked anxious for a moment but soon resumed its unreadable expression. "I know, but I can't intervene in mundane affairs. He can overcome this. Don't worry."

"I see."

Now I'm certain of it. She knows Mr. Allen, and she feels strongly for him, although not in the way we do.

"Are we finished here?" my father asked the imperial ambassador, who lay prostrate on the floor, gasping in pain. "I have a war to prepare for."

"Inconceivable," the thin man spluttered. "I can't—I *refuse to* believe it! H-How can a mere duke so casually welcome war with a great power like my homeland?! What's wrong with you?! Do you feel no fear?!"

"Fear?" my father and I repeated together. Then, we looked at each other...and smiled.

"Wh-What's so funny?! Have you lost your minds?!" the thin man shrieked, his smug attitude entirely gone.

"Oh, well, it is rather frightening," my father admitted. "The thought of allowing someone to whom I owe so much to die unrepaid terrifies me. Truly it does. So, I'll say this as many times as necessary—we are in haste, and we would like you to stay out of our way, Your Excellency, Imperial Ambassador Hughric Chaser. Wouldn't you agree, Stella?"

"Yes!" I immediately replied. I was terrified that I would never be able to see Mr. Allen again. If that came to pass, I wasn't certain that I would ever be able to recover. That was how deeply I...I...

The ambassador groaned as he rose with his guards' help. "You'll regret thi—"

"I won't regret anything," my father interjected. "Not ever again. I swore it to my late wife. This discussion is over!"

The thin man left the room with his guards, his legs quivering like a newborn deer's as he spat, "Barbarians!"

Once they were gone, my father turned to the girl, who had finished every last sip of her tea and bite of her pastry. "Now, Lady Hero, it was an honor to meet you," he said. "I hope to see you again someday—preferably not on the battlefield."

She looked at me, leaning forward, and said, "Mm-hmm. Saint Wolf, wipe my mouth."

Is it just me, or is she a bit like Lydia? I thought as I wiped her mouth with a handkerchief.

"Thank you." The Hero left her seat. "I don't make a habit of tormenting wolves...unless the worst happens. In that case, our next meeting will be in battle.”

“Oh? What do you mean by that?” my father asked with evident interest.

“To be honest, I can’t understand what you mean by ‘fear,’” she said, apparently ignoring the question as she walked toward the door. “I’ve only felt frightened once in my life.”

“Your renowned battle with the black dragon? Or perhaps your now legendary duel with the Lady of the Sword, which preceded it?”

“No.” The Hero looked back at us with a radiant smile. It was an expression of heartfelt love. “The scarlet crybaby doesn’t scare me. If she’s alone the next time we meet, I’ll crush her for certain. Only one person in this good-for-nothing world has saved me on a deadly battlefield or gotten angry and shed tears for me. The only time I’ve ever felt afraid was the moment I sensed that I might never be able to see him again. Just that once.”

My mind connected the dots.

Of course. Lydia and Mr. Allen once fought a black dragon alongside her and saved the royal capital.

“But that goes for the scarlet crybaby too. And she isn’t strong like I am—just good with a sword. She can’t walk a pitch-dark path without him—Allen—to hold her hand. So,” the Hero prophesied, “if deep, deep darkness ever swallows that crybaby up, she might become my enemy and the world’s. If that happens, Wolf, we’ll meet again soon...because I’ll have to kill her.”

Chapter 2

“What?! Felicia just got here from the royal capital?!” I repeated.

“Y-Yes, Lady Lynne!” Sida Stinton nodded repeatedly. The maid in training, who wore her glistening brown hair tied in pigtails, had been assigned to wait on me over summer vacation.

I had been in my room at the Leinster residence in the kingdom’s southern capital, trying to calm my nerves by working my way through the notebook of assignments that I had received from my dear brother—Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword—when she had rushed in with the news.

“Her carriage just arrived!” the girl continued. “Emma and the others are all safe too! I think they took Skyhawk Company griffins as far as a nearby town!”

“I see,” I said. “I’m glad. So, so glad.”

Knowing that my friends and acquaintances were safe made me feel more relieved than I had since Fireday, two days ago, when we had received that dreadful news: “Rebellion by reactionary nobles under Duke Algren. Royal capital and palace in flames. Lord Richard, his knights of the guard, and the Brain of the Lady of the Sword battled rebels in eastern capital—fates unknown.” That report from Emma, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number four, who had escaped the royal capital, had turned the mood in this house on its head.

The kingdom, my homeland, had four dukes, one each in the north, east, south, and west. Due to their contributions to the nation’s founding and blood ties to the royal family, members of these ducal houses were customarily styled “Highness.” I, for example, was “Her Highness, Lady Lynne Leinster.”

For generations, the heirs to the Four Great Dukedoms had been responsible for the defense of the realm. And yet the Algrens had still launched this ridiculous coup. Why, we were not yet certain. We knew that my dear brothers—Allen and Richard, who was the vice commander of the royal guard and my elder brother by blood

—had fought valiantly, but not what had become of them.

“Is there any more new intelligence?” I asked.

“Uh, um...” Sida replied. “Lady Lydia refused to dine again today.”

My dear sister, Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, whom I loved and respected, had walked side by side with my dear brother ever since they had both enrolled in the Royal Academy. She had wailed as soon as she had heard the ill news. Then, when she had calmed down, she had attempted to set out for the eastern capital at once. But our dear mother; our head maid, Anna; her second-in-command, Romy; and their number three, Lily, had barred her path. She had been holed up in her room ever since.

“And, um, I think envoys from Atlas and Bazel arrived earlier,” the maid in training added.

“Envoys?” I repeated slowly.

The League of Principalities ranked among the great powers of the continent, and two of its member states, the Principalities of Atlas and Bazel, bordered the Duchy of Leinster in the south. I had heard that they had been conducting military exercises along the border recently, but why would they choose this moment to contact us?

I couldn’t bear it any longer. Running my fingers over the notebook on my table, I read my dear brother’s warm, gentle handwriting: “You needn’t rush things, Lynne. Grow at your own pace.”

Dear brother, I...I want to go to your rescue, but I’m powerless! I want to comfort my dear sister, but I don’t know what to say.

As dejection overtook me, I seemed to hear the voices of my friends, who were currently in the north. I pictured Duke Howard’s little daughter, with her gorgeous platinum hair, crossing her arms and saying, “Humph! You’re such a wimp, Miss Second Place! We’ll just have to pick up your slack!”

“M-Mind your manners, Lady Tina. Lady Lynne, everything is going to be all right,” her maid, a blonde and ever-so-slightly clumsy scion of the Walkers, would interject, flustered but still trying to encourage me.

If only they were here now.

“U-Um...Lady Lynne?” Sida called, concern in her voice.

“I’m fine. I just had something on my mind,” I said, waving my left hand slightly as I rose to my feet. I traced the writing with my finger, then closed my notebook.

"Sida, I'm going to visit Felicia!" I told the maid in training, who was fondling the symbol of the Great Moon, a deity whose cult was not well known in our kingdom.

"Y-Yes, my lady!" she replied. "I believe she's still in the front entrance hall!"

We hurried to the mezzanine overlooking the front door and reached it just as a litter arrived to bear a girl away.

"Felicia!" I cried as Sida and I raced down the stairs.

The obviously exhausted girl with long, pale-chestnut hair and spectacles opened her eyes and weakly said, "Lynne...?"

"Oh, thank goodness. Thank goodness!" I craned over her and clasped her hand, which proved dreadfully cold. Her breathing was labored.

The girl lying in the litter was Felicia Fosse, the shrewd head clerk of Allen & Co., a joint business venture established by my house and the Ducal House of Howard. And until recently, she had been my upperclassman at the prestigious Royal Academy.

Tears filled my eyes as I looked around and saw a maid with dark-brown hair and dark skin—the Leinster Maid Corps's number four, Emma—among other familiar faces. No one was missing!

"Emma, everyone," I sobbed. "I'm so, so glad."

"Lady Lynne... You honor us with your concern," Emma replied. She and the other maids were becoming teary-eyed as well.

Then, while I clasped Felicia's hand and cast a spell to warm her, I realized that there were Howard maids present as well.

"I am Lynne Leinster," I said, bowing to a poker-faced blonde girl in cracked spectacles. "You have my sincere gratitude for keeping Felicia and everyone else safe. Thank you so, so much. Are any of you hurt?"

"I am Sally Walker, number four in the Howard Maid Corps," the blonde maid replied, letting only the faintest hint of emotion show. "We are all fine, thank you."

"Walker? Are you and Ellie—"

"Lynne... Here," Felicia murmured, cutting my question short as she pressed a few folded sheets of paper into my hand. A glance revealed the title: "The State of Rebel Supplies."

"What's this?" I asked, puzzled.

"My views. Give them...to Duchess Lisa." As soon as the papers were in my hands, the bespectacled girl went limp.

"Felicia? Felicia!" I called but got no answer.

I-It can't be!

"I beg your pardon, my lady!" Emma shouted as she and Sally squeezed between us. "Sally?"

"She's merely fainted," Sally responded after a moment. "She hardly slept on the way here."

On closer inspection, I could see the rhythmical rise and fall of Felicia's ample chest.

"Thank goodness," I sighed. Then, resisting the urge to slump to the floor, I straightened my posture, wiped my eyes, and said, "Emma—and you too, Sally—I'm placing Felicia in your care. Now, get her to a bedroom!"

"Yes, my lady!" both maids responded in unison.

I felt slightly discouraged as I watched them depart with Felicia. Journeying here from the royal capital in just four days must have been quite hard on my frail former schoolmate. And yet, to my amazement, she had still found time to write up a report. The reminder of why my dear brother had chosen her also left me feeling just a little blue.

I...I need to do more too!

"U-Um, my lady!" my maid in training said suddenly.

"Yes, Sida?"

"Uh, well..." Sida faltered. She had merely been a spectator to the earlier exchange. I watched, puzzled, as she approached and—

"Oh, there you are! Lady Lynne!" a cheery voice called from above me. Sida and I looked up as a young woman nimbly vaulted over the banister into empty air with a little "Alley-oop!"

"What do you think you're doing?!" I shouted, while Sida stammered a cry of surprise.

The young woman cast a levitation spell in mid fall, making her skirt billow as she slowly drifted down and landed on her feet in front of us. As far as I knew, she was the only person apart from Ellie and my dear brother and sister who could employ levitation with such ease.

"Lily, at your service!" she declared, giggling as she performed a theatrical salute. "I've been looking aaall over for you!"

Lily, a tall young woman, had long scarlet hair tied with a black ribbon and wore a top with a design of interlocking arrows, a long skirt, and leather boots. This somewhat eccentric eighteen-year-old served as the Leinster Maid Corps's number three.

"Stop jumping off the mezzanine," I admonished her. "Look at how you've shocked Sida; she's stiff as a board."

"Aaaw, but it's so cool," Lily retorted. "Hi there, Sida."

"Oh, h-hello, L-Lily, ma'am."

"What a nice girl you are!" Lily giggled and swept Sida up in a hug. The maid in training babbled incoherently, while passing maids and menservants continued by with looks that said they were used to Lily's exuberance.

Once Lily let go, the discombobulated Sida muttered, "O Great Moon, is being hugged by a girl a sin?" while the older maid turned her attention to me.

"Lily," I said, holding up a hand to forestall her, "I'm not in the mood for—"

My attempt at a cold refusal ended in a startled cry as Lily threw her arms around me.

Her chest is...suffocating me.

"None of that," she said, gently patting my head like she had when I was little. "Times like this are just when you need to smile! Cheer up. It will be all right."

"Fine!" I said, spluttering as I came up for air. "You made your point! Jeez!"

Lily beamed at me and laughed musically. She always threw me off my stride.

Beside us, the maid in training was lost in thought. She fingered her pendant and looked grave as she murmured, “O Great Moon, is that what I ought to do? B-But it would be so embarrassing...”

“Sida!” I shouted, finally slipping free of Lily. “Don’t take any lessons from this!”

“That’s the spirit, Sida!” the older maid said, turning to her. “Just do what I do, and, believe it or not, you’ll be a wonderful maid before you know it.”

“M-My feet! My feet are off the ground! I just keep spinning! O G-Great Moon!” pleaded the disoriented maid in training as Lily cheerfully took her by the hands and twirled her around.

“Stop, Lily,” I said. “Sida, you’ll never become a proper maid if you follow her example.”

“That’s not very nice, Lady Lynne,” the self-proclaimed maid protested. “I *am* a proper maid! Really I am!” She was making a scene, but at least she had finally released Sida.

I turned my back on Lily and focused on the dizzy trainee.

“Everything’s still spinning,” she groaned. “But I’m going to become your maid, Lady Lynne!”

“Yes, you will, Sida,” I said. “We’re going to work through our problems together.”

“Yes, my lady! I’ll give it my all!” Sida clenched her little fists. She reminded me of a puppy.

I looked over my shoulder and said, “So, Lily, aren’t you here to summon me?”

“Oh, that’s right!” The older maid stopped throwing a tantrum and delivered her message: “The mistress says, ‘Come to the council chamber.’ Envoys from Atlas and Bazel are in there now, so it will be ‘a good learning opportunity for you.’”

“Mother wants me?!” I exclaimed. “Why didn’t you say so sooner?! Let’s go, Lily! Sida, you won’t be allowed in, so go check on Felicia. You can tell me how she is later.”

“Sure thing!”

“Y-Yes, my lady!”

Still, that was an impressive imitation of my dear mother’s voice, I reflected as I followed Lily to the east wing of the second floor. *If she can speak like that, she ought to do it more often.*

“Is something on your mind, Lady Lynne?” Lily asked, bringing her face close to mine.

"Nothing," I replied after a moment's hesitation. "I was just thinking that you won't be receiving a maid's uniform anytime soon."

"Oh, you're awful! What a mean thing to say! I'll tell Allen on you!"

"D-Don't bring my dear brother into this! It's not fair!"

*

I could hear two unfamiliar men's voices coming from the council hall where I was to meet my dear parents. "Your Highness, we do not wish for war!" one said. "In fact, we hope to ally with you and offer our aid in subduing the rebel forces."

"But for the sake of our fellow countrymen, whom you have wrongfully deprived of their homelands," the other continued, "we will use any means at our disposal. Your house's battle prowess is renowned throughout the continent. Your standing army, however, is less impressive."

Those must be the envoys from Atlas and Bazel.

"It sounds as though talks have already started," I said to Lily. "We can't enter in the middle of—"

"Not a problem! Pardon us!"

"H-Hang on! Lily?!" I cried as the maid ignored my misgivings and flung open the door.

Two men stared at us. They were standing with their fists clenched, and both wore tasteless outfits overburdened with gaudy embellishments.

My father, Duke Liam Leinster, and my mother, Duchess Lisa Leinster, remained in their chairs, sipping tea. Their elegance contrasted sharply with the envoys' agitation. Behind them stood our head maid, Anna, and her bespectacled second-in-command, Romy. The pair always served as bodyguards on such occasions.

Our house had once employed a butler, back before I was born, but we had abolished the post following a serious incident in which he had nearly kidnapped my dear sister. Ever since, we had granted our maids levels of authority that would be unthinkable by the standards of other houses. Naturally, our maid corps was a strict meritocracy. The fact that Romy, a dark-haired and dark-skinned immigrant from the southern isles, served as its second-in-command testified to that.

“What? Maya?” I blurted out from my position hiding behind Lily.

Beside my dear mother sat a petite woman whose chestnut-brown hair was just long enough to cover her ears—Maya Mato, the Leinster Maid Corps’s former number three, who had attended upon my dear sister and me when we were little. She had shown us her darling baby daughter, Lynia, a week earlier, but what was she doing here?

“We seem to have strayed from the matter at hand,” one of the envoys resumed, irritation apparent in his voice. “We shall expect your answer tomorrow.”

“We aren’t demanding the full return of the former principalities of Etna and Zana all at once,” the other added. “A gradual restitution will be quite satisfactory.”

The restitution of Etna and Zana?! This is too sudden! We can’t possibly respond to such a demand so quickly. And based on what I heard the envoys saying earlier, the league must know about the rebellion.

The League of Principalities, which ruled the peninsula to the south of the Duchy of Leinster, had once comprised seven states in the north, six in the south, and the independent city of water. But the former northern principalities of Etna and Zana had found it difficult to restrain their desire for fertile Leinster lands. Their designs had sparked the three successive Southern Wars. Thanks in part to the efforts of my dear mother and grandmother, both principalities had ultimately been annexed into the kingdom. We had since established an under-duchy to administer the now peaceful region.

“I cannot give you an answer here,” my father said, waving his hand. “I must consult with my vassals.”

“We shall return tomorrow,” said one envoy.

“We have every hope that you will choose wisely,” his colleague added.

With that, they took their leave.

My dear father frowned. “Quite a vexing problem,” he remarked. Gloom pervaded the hall.

Atlas and Bazel are uncompromising. What could—

The sound of hands clapping drew my gaze to my dear mother. “Now, let’s proceed to the next order of business,” she said. “Lynne, kindly explain those papers you're holding. Given the situation, I've decided to enlist Maya's help, although I do regret taking her away from Lynia."

"I appreciate your concern, mistress," Maya interjected, "but my mother and husband will take good care of her."

"Forgive me," my dear mother responded after a brief pause. "Lynne."

"R-Right!" I said, rising to my feet. Then, somewhat nervously, I launched into an explanation.

Felicia's report mainly addressed the following subjects:

- The size of the enemy army, estimated based on the quantity of matériel it traded for.
- The state of rebel provisions, calculated based on the number of transactions they had made and the number of trains in service between the eastern and royal capitals.
- The condition of the logistical operations that supported ongoing railway usage, as deduced from the intervals between trains.

Each point was concise and backed up by sound logic. The enemy generals would be astounded if they ever saw these papers. From a strategic standpoint, it offered us a considerable advantage over the rebels.

The final page of the report bore Felicia's scrawled conclusion: "The majority of the rebel forces lack sufficient logistical support. Although they control many trains, they neglect arrangements to sustain railroad transportation." It also featured an addendum: "No sign of active griffin or wyvern usage."

"Splendid," my dear mother pronounced once she had heard my explanation and read the report. "They do say that people show their true worth in times of trouble. Our logistical operations will be in good hands with Felicia. Anna, distribute copies of this report to all our vassal houses posthaste."

"Certainly, mistress." The head maid bowed respectfully.

"If Felicia's report is accurate," my dear father resumed once he, too, finished reading it, "then the rebels occupying the royal capital..."

He tapped the map of the kingdom on the wall behind him with a pointer. A large black dot appeared over the royal capital, followed by white dots in the north, south, and west—presumably marking the capitals of each duchy.

"...must plan to start by eliminating either the Howards or us," he concluded, indicating the north and south with his pointer. "Because—"

"The Yustinian Empire is making trouble for the Howards, while the armies of Atlas and Bazel are doing the same for us," my dear mother said, carrying on the explanation. "Given the circumstances, both must have ties to the rebels, meaning that they can catch us in a double envelopment if they strike now. Unsurprisingly, our enemies don't seem to have managed to affect the Lebuferas and the Order of Royal Knights, who are still staring down the Dark Lord's armies across Blood River."

She raised her left index finger, and large black dots appeared in the north and south of the map. Another black dot, the largest of all, then covered the west. Seeing the situation laid out on the map brought home to me how great a risk of being attacked on two fronts both we and the Howards ran.

"Based on charts alone, we seem to be at a disadvantage," my dear father said calmly. "They hold the royal capital, and the royal family is missing. We're cut off from communication with the Ducal Houses of Howard and Lebufera. But the situation isn't so simple. Is it, Anna?"

"No, it isn't, master," Anna cheerfully agreed. Beside her, Romy nodded emphatically. Lily, however, was slumped over the table, moaning that she couldn't wait for lunch.

"Lily, do you understand the situation?" Romy demanded, her spectacles flashing.

"Yup, you bet I do," our number-three maid replied, raising herself from the table. She then stood up, moved to a position beside the map, and ran her finger across it. Once her digit came to rest on the royal capital, she continued in a different tone. "The royal palace and capital have fallen, but we've still heard no word of His Majesty or the rest of the royal family. The natural conclusion is that they successfully evacuated to the west, as one would expect in an emergency."

"Why do you say that?" my dear father asked, sounding amused. My dear mother, Anna, Romy, and Maya wore identical expressions. They all had a soft spot for Lily when you got down to it.

"If the rebels had killed or captured any member of the royal family, they would make a point to advertise that fact," the maid continued. "But they haven't done so, and the army that occupied the royal capital has made no major moves since. The magical communications that Earl Sykes has decrypted tell the same story." Earl Sykes was the future father-in-law of my dear brother Richard, and oversaw our duchy's intelligence operations. "I don't know whether Miss Fosse's report is correct or if there are other reasons, but I suspect that multiple factors have combined to slow them down."

"Hm... Such as?" my dear father pressed.

The Leinster Maid Corps's number three straightened her back and looked at my dear parents. "I was juuust thinking that maybe there's still fighting in the eastern capital. So, the rebels might be having trouble making up their minds about whether to call reinforcements back from the royal capital, you know?"

Lily may have reverted to her usual singsong tone, but her conclusion still shocked the whole hall. The eastern capital belonged to the Ducal House of Algren, leaders of the rebellion, and they had launched their insurrection four days ago. How could they still be facing resistance there?

"That view is overly optimistic, surely," Romy objected. "I want to believe it, and I couldn't bear it if anything had happened to little Lord Richard, but this situation calls for detached, dispassionate analysis."

"Oh, but I've got good reasons for my ideas," our number three countered.

"And what are they?"

Lily smiled. "Lord Richard is in the eastern capital. And most importantly, so is Mr. Allen."

Her utterly confident declaration left Romy speechless.

My heart was heavy. How could Lily have such faith in my dear brother? She had only met him a few times, during summer vacations. I felt as though I'd lost at something.

If only Tina and Ellie were here so I could talk to them about this right away.

"Don't worry, my lady," Maya whispered, gently taking my hand. "Just keep growing little by little."

That was just what my dear brother had told me. After a moment, I bashfully whispered back, "I will. Thank you, Maya."

If I had to name the emotion I had just felt, it would be...envy. But...But right now, I was my dear brother's student! Tina, Ellie, Stella, and I! There was no room for Lily, and we wouldn't make any!

"Don't you want your pastry, Lady Lynne?" Lily interjected as she returned to the table. "Then, I'll just help myself to—"

"You can't have it!" I snapped, snatching my plate away from her outstretched hand.

The nerve of her! I can never let my guard down!

"In any case," my dear father said, "this threat to the kingdom is unprecedented. Tomorrow, we will convene the heads of every noble house in the south. And after that council, we must give the envoys from Atlas and Bazel our response. We need all the information we can gather to determine our future course."

"Yes, sir!" we all responded in unison.

Anna left the hall with Romy in tow. Lily stayed behind.

"Phew! That made me so nervous," she said, rocking her chair as she munched pastries and sipped tea.

What a liar!

"Oh, I almost forgot. Lynne," my dear mother called.

"Yes?" I responded, tearing my irate gaze away from the maid. "What is it, dear mother?"

She didn't speak immediately. When she did, she wore a look of deep distress, which she had not shown during the earlier discussion. "Check in on Lydia every day. I've assigned several high-ranking maids to look after her, but they say she refuses to leave her room. And I might provoke her too much if I go myself. I hate to trouble you, Maya, but would you go with her?"

"Yes, of course!" I said.

Maya was quick to add, "Please leave it to me."

"I'm counting on you." My dear mother sighed. "This situation brings home to me just how much Allen means to Lydia. I hope that he's safe, but..."

*

That evening, after changing into my nightgown, I took Sida with me and approached my dear sister's room. She hadn't left it at all that day, and I was feeling worried.

I breathed deeply. In, out. In, out.

“I can do this,” I said when I was done.

“G-Good luck, my lady,” Sida chimed in encouragingly as I reached out and touched the door.

None of the magical seals that had barred it remained. I was about to push it open when I recalled the sight of my dear sister sobbing over the recent report that my dear brother’s fate was unknown. I felt suddenly hesitant.

Without warning, a slender hand reached out from beside me. I glimpsed a sleeve patterned with interlocking arrows.

“Lady Lydiaaa!” its owner called. “I’ve brought you stew for dinner!”

“H-Hang on! L-Lily?!” I cried, flustered, as the maid beat me to the punch and opened the door. Then, a look of confusion appeared on her face.

“Oh dear.”

“What’s the ma— Dear sister?”

The room was empty.

My dear sister had spent her summer lazing about, so her cast-off clothes lay scattered everywhere. Thick spell books were piled on her desk, alongside a disorderly assortment of notebooks and pens, and crumpled balls of paper littered the floor. Allen, the plush wolf that my dear brother had given her as a souvenir of his trip to the north, reposed on the bed. The round bedside table was the only tidy surface in the room. A sheet of notepaper set on it bore an intricate spell formula in my dear brother’s hand. My dear sister’s planner lay open, with a single date—her birthday—circled in red.

Lily set down her tray on the round table, studied the paper, and hugged Allen. “Hm... She didn’t leave any trace of mana here,” she said. “Now, shall we search the house or—”

“Lily! Don’t take advantage of this situation to take what isn’t yours!” I snapped, incensed in spite of myself.

Sh-She’s simply unbelievable!

Sida picked up a crumpled sheet of paper and unfolded it. “M-My lady,” she said, her eyes widening. “Look at this.”

“What is it? A spell?”

Part of an extremely precise formula covered every inch of the paper. I could tell that it was an ancient fire spell, but nothing else. I racked my brain, trying to recall anything similar in the books I had read. This seemed a bit like...a taboo.

“No, that couldn’t be it,” I muttered, shaking my head.

"My lady?" Sida asked.

I ignored her question and crumpled the paper again, then incinerated it.

Now that great spells were a thing of the past, taboos were the most powerful magic in existence. But they came with a caveat—taboo spells were so destructive and so inhumane that their use had been banned even in wartime. The Human-Demon Accords governing the War of the Dark Lord had forbidden them. My dear sister, Lydia Leinster, would never resort to such a thing!

I snatched Allen back from Lily, who had taken a seat on the bed and begun eating the stew.

"Oh, come on, Lady Lynne!" she whined. "He's mine. Give him back."

"He is not! And mind your manners!" I responded. "Can't you trace my dear sister's mana?"

"Hm..." Lily raised her left index finger. Something about the gesture reminded me of my dear brother. I hugged the stuffed animal as she silently cast a wide-range, light-element detection spell, producing a faint glow.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well, she's not in the house, and she hasn't left any traces of mana here either." Lily frowned slightly and gulped down another big spoonful of stew.

I pondered. Where could my dear sister have gone?

"Lady Lynne," a new voice interjected.

"Oh, Maya!" I exclaimed, looking up as the maid corps's former number three entered the room.

She looked around, then picked up a cloth bag decorated with a design of a little bird, which hung nearby, and smiled at us. "I know where Lady Lydia has gone," she announced. "Would you accompany me on an evening stroll?"

Following a brief, starlit walk through the southern capital, Maya led us to a hill a short distance from the Leinster residence. I had been born and raised in this city, but I had never visited this place before. The crumbling stone ruins before us were...rather unsettling.

I clung to Maya's left arm, and Sida took her right. The carefree Lily strode ahead of us into the ruins alone, wrapped in a pale scarlet cape and carrying a lantern in one hand. Sida and I called her name in hushed tones, but she looked over her shoulder at us with a wink and a smile.

"What an ex-cellent night for ex-ploration!" she practically sang. Then, with a smug giggle, she added, "Oh! You're not scaaared, are you? Well, I guess you *are* still children."

Th-The nerve of this maid! And she sounded a bit like Tina just now! That's a mark against her in my book!

Sida and I quietly let go of Maya's arms and gripped her sleeves instead.

Th-This is out of my control! I'm certainly not afraid!

"We should go inside too, Lady Lynne, Sida," Maya said, smiling kindly.

"R-Right," we both replied and started walking.

We caught up to Lily at the head of a stone passage. Dozens of large, marble columns lined the corridor, creating an atmosphere that was...quite eerie.

Our number-three maid cast multiple sound-dampening spells, humming all the while. She followed the performance with an unsettling remark: "I hope we get to see a ghost or something while we're here."

"L-Lily?!" I cried, startled. "S-Such things are better left unsaid."

"Th-That's right, ma'am!" Sida added. "Th-They come when you call them!"

"Awww, but they might be nice ghosts," Lily said. "Look! Over there!"

Sida and I hastily threw our arms around Maya again. The caring ex-maid smiled cheerfully.

"What a magnificent building," Sida murmured, peering around without relaxing her grip. "It looks like picture scrolls I've seen of the Great Moon's holy land."

The stone here really is quite fine.

I sensed a faint trace of mana and spotted a dim glow from the tops of the columns. Some of the structure's magical lamps were apparently still operational. Here and there, moonlight and starlight filtered in through holes in the roof, creating a mystical scene.

We proceeded along the straight passage until we came upon a massive stone double door, one side of which was missing. Maya halted before the door that was still standing.

"What is this place?" I asked her.

"A shrine built before the War of the Dark Lord, I believe, although I don't know what people worshipped here. Lady Lynne." Maya held out her right arm, and we looked ahead in the direction she pointed.

"Dear sister...?"

Eight massive pillars supported what had once been a circular shrine surrounded by dim magical lights. Starlight streamed in through a massive rent in the roof. And within the ruin was a woman of extraordinary beauty. She knelt, clasping something in her hands as she silently and fervently prayed. Her long scarlet hair had lost its usual luster, and she looked smaller than I remembered her. Worse yet, she was barefoot and wore only a white nightgown. My heart ached at the sight of my idol—my beloved elder sister, our kingdom's renowned Lady of the Sword, Lydia Leinster.

"I don't believe it," I murmured, drawing in my breath. "Is she...praying?" Only one thing could have driven her to this—her wish to see my dear brother safe and sound.

"When she was very young, Lady Lydia would sometimes slip out of the house and come here to pray alone," Maya told me softly. "I could never get her to explain how she discovered this place."

"Maya," I said slowly, "I don't think we should be here. Let's go back to the house and—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Lily left her position on my left side and strode into the shrine. Sida and I frantically cried her name, but she kept walking too quickly for us to stop her.

"Lady Lydiaaa! You shouldn't go out dressed like that," she called, taking off her pale scarlet cape and draping it around my dear sister's shoulders.

My dear sister continued praying...but eventually, she muttered, "I don't need it."

"You'll catch a chill!" Lily protested.

I cradled my head in my hands.

How can she be this bad at reading the room? That's another way she reminds me of Tina, and another mark against her!

I signaled Maya and Sida with a look and then stepped forward myself. "Dear sister, I, um..."

A moment of silence followed.

"I'm fine, Lynne," she responded at last, standing up without removing the cape. Her hands clasped her pocket watch, which remained stopped.

The ruins suddenly grew dark; a cloud must have hidden the stars. Maya and Sida swiftly lit the shrine with their magic, but my dear sister remained staring quietly up at the dismal night sky.

"Come on, Lady Lydia!" Lily suddenly broke the silence, her arms spread wide. "I'll carry you back to the—"

"I'll walk."

"That won't do! You'll hurt your pretty feet. I'm sure Allen will be sad when he hears about this."

Lily's argument silenced my dear sister, but Maya then produced a pair of shoes from the cloth bag she had picked up earlier and set them on the ground.

"Please wear these, my lady," she said.

"Oh, Mayaaa! What'd you bring those along for?!" Lily whined. "I wanted to carry her in my arms like a little princess! I haven't gotten a chance to do that since we were kids!"

Th-The nerve of this fake maid!

Maya merely glanced at her and said, "Lady Lily, please show some self-restraint."

"I'm not a l-lady!" protested a flustered Lily. "Don't call me that!"

"I've retired from service, Lady Lily. And since I'm not your colleague, I must address you properly." Maya chuckled. "Ah, saying 'Lady Lily' just feels *right.*"

"Oh, Maya, you big meanie..." Lily crouched down dejectedly and began writing on the ground with her finger. Maya, it seemed, had come out on top.

My dear sister stepped into her shoes. Then, she took another look up at the night sky before turning on her heel and walking off without a word. We hurried after her—all but one of us.

"Lily, we're leaving!" I called over my shoulder.

"I'll be right with you!" The maid swiftly slipped behind me and caught me in her embrace.

"L-Lily?!"

"Mmm... I love hugging you too, Lady Lynne."

"H-Hey!"

The sight of us was almost too much for Sida. "O G-Great Moon," she babbled, "should I j-join in at times like this?!"

"Act like a normal person and help me!" I shouted.

Lily, Sida, and I chatted the rest of the way home. The gloom that had hung over me was no more.

Could Lily have planned this?

"Lady Lynne, let's take a bath together when we get back! You used to get in the tub with me all the time when you were little!"

I take it back. This fake so-called maid doesn't have a thought in her head!

*

I woke up in my now familiar office at Allen & Co. in the royal capital. The room looked just as it always did. There were my desk and chair, which the professor and headmaster had painstakingly selected for me. Only one thing was out of the ordinary—he wore a white shirt and sat in a nearby chair, working.

"Felicia, this number isn't right. Neither is this one or this one," he said, twirling his pen. "You must be exhausted. You'd better not be overworking yourself. Are you remembering to eat right and get plenty of sleep?"

What a mean thing to ask after we haven't seen each other in so long! Who does he think he is?!

I puffed up my cheeks, strode up to him, planted my hands on my hips, and glared. But despite my best "I'm angry!" face, he smiled tenderly at me. And as much as I hated to admit it, I was glad. Very glad. So glad that I didn't know what to do with myself. Just being able to see him and hear his voice made my heart beat faster. Apparently, I had missed him more than I realized.

"I threw those in to test you, Allen!" I said, folding my arms to mask my embarrassment.

"I see," he replied. "In that case, did I pass your test?"

"Lecturing me was an automatic failure! If you want to pass..."

"Yes?"

"Come work with me once you get back to the royal capital. You only spend time with the others, and it's not fair. I want some attention too!"

I could never normally have brought myself to make such a blatant request out loud, but it came easily. When had I become so forthright? But my sliver of doubt vanished when Allen opened his mouth.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said, frowning. "It looks as though my return trip will be a little delayed. But thank you so much for Caren's new dagger; it really helped us out. I knew you'd come through for us."

So, the dagger I had picked out for Caren, who was my best friend and Allen's younger sister, had arrived safely.

"Don't skimp on the praise," I responded, standing up straighter and laughing smugly. "Finding that thing wasn't easy, you know. But if it came in handy, then my work was—" I faltered and let my words trail off.

Hang on. What does he mean, "it really helped us out"? Did Caren already get into a situation where she had to use it? Where?

My head was in a whirl.

"To be honest, I didn't think you'd be able to find one so quickly," Allen continued, resting his head in his hands and chuckling. "You breezed past my expectations."

"Huh?! What's that supposed to mean?!" I balled up my fists and waved them wildly in protest. "Jeez! Jeez, jeez, *jeez*! Why do you take that tone with me, Allen?! You never act like this with Stella and Caren, or with Tina, Ellie, and Lynne!"

"Because I trust you, of course, Felicia," he replied, winking and spreading his arms in a theatrical gesture. "I know I can count on Allen & Co.'s head clerk."

I glowered at him. "Meanie." Then, I yelped when he tapped my forehead with his finger. "Wh-What was that for?"

"Felicia, I'm counting on you to look after Lydia and the others for me," he said, giving me a smile that was tender yet tinged with sadness. "Please help them. And be mindful of your own health too. Don't push yourself too hard."

"What? Allen, what do you mean by— Allen?"

My office was crumbling as darkness engulfed it. The next thing I knew, Allen was dressed in a tattered sorcerer's robe and holding a staff. Then, he turned his back to me and walked into the darkness.

"Allen?! Where are you going?!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Wait! Wait for me! I'll go with you!"

I stepped into the dark and...

*

"Allen!"

My own shout woke me up.

The first sight that met my eyes was a white ceiling. I thought that it was decorated with an intricate pattern, but without my glasses, it looked too blurry for me to be certain. I was lying on an unbelievably huge bed, and I could tell that the room was ridiculously spacious too.

Does royalty live here?

I sat up. The foliage I could see out the window looked a bit different from the trees of the royal capital.

Where am I...?

“Rise and shine, Miss Fosse!” came a familiar greeting from my bedside. “Here are your spectacles.”

I turned in surprise. After putting on my glasses, I goggled at the slender, chestnut-haired woman who had handed them to me.

“Anna?” I said, disbelieving.

“That’s right!” chirped the Ducal House of Leinster’s smiling head maid. “Everyone’s favorite Anna, at your service.”

My memories came rushing back. Emma and the other maids had rescued me from the royal capital. We had fled south together, and— Of course! The report!

“Have no fear. Lady Lynne presented your findings to the mistress,” Anna said, forestalling my panic. “In the midst of all this confusion, we sincerely appreciate your relevant, up-to-date intelligence.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” I breathed a sigh of relief. Then, I felt a chill; Anna had an unsettling look in her eyes, and she held a moist towel, although I hadn’t noticed her pick it up. “Anna? U-Um...”

“You seem to have worked up quite a sweat in your sleep, Miss Fosse.” The head maid giggled. “Allow me to wipe you clean.”

Her gaze was locked on my chest.

“I...I’m fine! I can t-towel off myself!” I cried, clutching a pillow and shaking my head wildly as I sensed danger.

“Oh?” Anna tilted her head in mock puzzlement. I could see the sadism in her eyes. “Is this a case of ‘Only one person is allowed to touch my skin’?”

“I-It is not! Anyway, not even Allen has ever touched—”

But he *had* touched my forehead more than once, I remembered. I raised my pillow to hide my blushing face and groaned inwardly.

“Oh my, what have we here?” Anna asked, beaming. “I seem to have struck a nerve. I simply must get the details from Emma later.”

“Y-You ‘simply must’ not!” I shouted. “J-Jeez! Allen and I really haven’t done anything like—”

Suddenly, I recalled the royal palace as I had seen it during our escape from the capital. Then, my thoughts turned to the growing trade in military supplies and the knights in green visiting the city's lesser merchants, including my own family's firm, which I had noticed beforehand. People who caused so much harm in the royal capital couldn't have left the eastern capital untouched.

"Anna," I said hesitantly, "is Allen, um..."

"He will be just fine," the head maid assured me. "Mr. Allen is the strongest person I know. So, you needn't worry, Miss Fosse. I'm certain that your parents are safe as well. The effective commander of the force that captured the royal capital is Lord Haag Harclay, a grand knight. He won't harm civilians. Now, I'll just wipe down your back for you."

She sounded certain, but she wouldn't give me any more details. Allen really was strong, not just as a swordsman and a sorcerer, but as a person. Still, I felt as though I would go mad with worry. I cursed my own weakness. If only I were like Stella or Caren, I could have fought alongside him.

I rolled up my clothes and turned my back toward Anna. The feel of the cold cloth made me squeal.

"Dear me, what a charming scream," Anna cooed. "I ought to record this and share it with Mr. Allen."

"Stop that!" I cried. "I'll die of shame!"

"Whatever shall I do? If you would share just a bit of your bosom with me, Miss Fosse, then I might consider keeping this to myself."

"Th-That's impossible! Besides, there's nothing good about it. I get stiff shoulders, and men stare at me."

"Does that go for Mr. Allen as well?"

"Allen looking at them doesn't bother me that— D-Don't tease me like that!" I wrapped my arms around my chest and glared at the maid wiping my back.

"I understand how Emma feels a bit better now," Anna said, giggling like a mischievous child. "There, all done."

"Thank you," I replied stiffly. I maintained a reproachful look as I took the cloth from her and began wiping myself off.

From outside, I could hear an endless succession of whinnying horses, rumbling carriage wheels, and flapping griffin wings. This was too much traffic, even for the Ducal House of Leinster. They must have already shifted to a war footing for—

"Miss Fosse," the head maid said suddenly, snapping me out of my reflections. I turned to face her and saw that she looked more subdued than usual, but her eyes harbored violent emotion. "I must tell you, Mr. Allen reportedly went above and beyond the call of duty in the eastern capital, alongside Young Master Richard."

"I see," I said slowly.

I wasn't surprised; the odd manner in which Emma and the others had acted on our way here had tipped me off. I had imagined it. I had prepared for it—or at least I thought I had. But still...

I pressed my hands to my chest. The storm raging in my heart made it hard to breathe. Tears blurred my vision and splotched my glasses.

Allen. Allen! Allen*! Who are you to say, "Don't push yourself too hard"?!* I *should be telling* you *that! Whose footsteps will I follow in if I lose you?!*

All of a sudden, I became acutely aware of my feelings.

Oh. I care for him so...so...

Anna tenderly clasped my hands. "Never fear," she said. "Not to repeat myself, but he is strong—stronger than even the Hero, in a sense. He would never do anything to truly sadden you young ladies."

I took off my glasses and dried my eyes on my sleeve. "Anna..."

She's right. This is no time for crying. My tears won't help him, so they can wait until after I make sure he's safe. I'm not strong or brave enough to go into battle, but I'll save him in my own way!

I looked Anna straight in the eye and said, "Please, give me work to do!"

"Miss Fosse?" She looked genuinely taken aback.

"I'd be no use on a battlefield, and I'm so frail that a little exertion leaves me bedridden like this." I clenched my fists. "But I'll do what I can! I'm sure that's what Allen would tell me to do."

The Ducal House of Leinster's head maid looked at me, then gently smiled. Her affectionate gaze reminded me of my late grandmother. "I see that you are quite strong yourself, Miss Fosse. Very well, leave everything to me. You won't regret it."

"Thank you so much." I bowed deeply, feeling as though a light had just come on in my heart.

All right! Time for Felicia to get serious! Now that my mind's made up, I'll get right to work and—

With a smooth gesture, Anna laid me back on the bed.

Huh? What did she just do?!

"But please rest for today," she cheerfully admonished me. "You'll have plenty to do tomorrow. Emma, Sally, kindly bring Miss Fosse her meal."

I heard a loud clatter from outside the room. After a knock on the door, two maids entered. One was tall and slender with dark-brown hair and somewhat dark skin. The other was a self-possessed blonde wearing glasses. Both were gorgeous, and both seemed a bit flustered.

"H-How did you notice us?!" the former demanded. "We cast so many sound-dampening spells!"

"I see that the Leinsters' head maid is as inscrutable as ever," added the latter.

"Emma, Sally," I called from the bed.

The maids' eyes widened as soon as they met mine.

"Miss Fosse!"

"Oh, thank goodness!" they cried as they tearfully rushed over to me and took my hands.

Anna, meanwhile, left with a wave and a cheery "Well then, I'll be on my way!"

"Thank you so much," I said, bowing to Emma and Sally. "Without all of you, I wouldn't be here."

"Your praise is more than we deserve."

"Forgive us for forcing you to overexert yourself."

"Emma, Sally, I—"

Just then, my stomach grumbled loudly.

Wh-Why now? I thought, blushing.

The maids, however, smiled kindly.

"This calls for a meal!" Emma declared.

"Allow me to feed you," Sally said.

"Don't you think that's rather high-handed of you?"

"What about you, Emma? You wiped every last bit of Miss Fosse's body clean last night."

"I-Is this really the time or place to bring that up?!"

The bickering maids enlivened the room in no time.

Don't worry, Allen. I'm fine, and I'm done crying. So...So just wait a little while longer. I'll get to work helping everyone soon, and I'll give it my very best!

"Emma, Sally," I said to the maids, who were busy glaring at each other, "I have a request for you and everyone else from Allen & Co. Will you hear me out?"

*

"There, that about does it. Sida, fetch my beret."

"At once, my lady!" Sida responded, stepping forward to place the hat on my head.

I surveyed myself in the full-length mirror and nodded. It wouldn't do to meet the heads of every southern house in casual attire, but a military uniform seemed excessive, so I had settled on my familiar Royal Academy uniform.

"You won't be entering the council hall, will you?" I asked.

"No, my lady. B-But I've been assigned to open the door!" the maid in training replied excitedly. "My prayers to the Great Moon bore fruit!"

I'd better not mention that I asked Anna to give her that job. Being a magnanimous mistress includes keeping my own council.

"Is there any news?"

"Oh, yes! Um..." Sida fished a notepad out of her pocket. "Unfortunately, we have no fresh intelligence concerning the rebellion, but Miss Fosse has woken up and eaten a meal."

"Felicia has? Thank goodness."

My former-upperclassman-turned-head-clerk was physically frail. Fleeing here from the royal capital must have been quite an ordeal for her.

"I hope she'll take time to rest and recuperate," I added.

"Well..." Sida hesitated. "I hear that Miss Fosse is reading quite a lot of documents in bed."

I took a moment to digest that information. "I can't say I'm surprised."

I felt a headache coming on. How could someone so delicate be so addicted to her work? Then again, that was probably part of what my dear brother saw in her.

"Thank you for telling me." I adjusted my beret, then waved my hand and said, "Come along, Sida. Let's be on our way."

The leaders of every noble house in the south had assembled in the grand, two-story council hall. In addition to two marquesses and four earls, a dazzling array of commanders renowned for their deeds of valor, cunning, and ferocity were in attendance.

"Right this way, Lady Lynne," Anna called to me from the back of the room.

After a quick "I'll see you later" to Sida, I nervously settled into a chair to the left of the seat of honor. The scrutiny I received from the assembled military leaders was rather embarrassing.

"How is my dear sister?" I quietly asked Anna.

"Lady Lydia says that she is not feeling well," she replied. "Maya is attending her."

"I see."

The door opened to admit my parents and a man with curly red hair who looked much like my dear father—my uncle, Lucas Leinster. They swiftly took their seats at the head of the gathering, and Sida closed the door.

"Welcome, one and all," my father greeted the assembled nobles. "Time is pressing, so I'll be brief: The Ducal House of Algren and the conservative nobility have launched an insurrection for what they call their 'Great Cause'! The royal capital and palace have already fallen, and we do not know what has become of His Majesty and the royal family. Needless to say, the main rebel stronghold is the eastern capital. Lucas, if you would."

"Of course, Liam." Uncle Lucas, who sat on my dear father's left, took up the conversation. As the under-duke, he governed the territory south of our duchy that had once been the Principalities of Etna and Zana. That made him especially knowledgeable about the league's movements. "As I reported previously, the Principalities of Atlas and Bazel have deployed troops along the under-duchy's borders. I believe that they coordinated this with the rebellion."

A stir ran through the hall, and no wonder—this wasn't new information, but an alliance between the Ducal House of Algren and the League of Principalities was still shocking.

"Meaning that we face the armies of Atlas and Bazel with the rebels at our backs," my dear father resumed. "And envoys representing both principalities have demanded the gradual restitution of Etna and Zana. I wish to hear your opinions at this council. What should we do?"

The two marquesses were the first to speak.

"Loath as I am to say it, I believe that we should dig in our heels and draw out the conflict until we learn whether His Majesty is safe."

"I agree. If His Majesty is well, then the rebels pose no threat. They'll eventually disintegrate without our help."

A chorus of other voices followed, all advocating either a protracted, defensive war or holding ourselves aloof from the conflict. Foreign powers considered the Ducal House of Leinster and its vassals a den of the kingdom's most warlike nobles, but it was precisely our martial emphasis that led us to approach war with extreme caution. Material and financial loss would result from any military campaign—especially one against the League of Principalities, one of the three great powers of the continent. Those who knew war best, feared it most.

"Liam, I believe that gathering intelligence should be our priority," Uncle Lucas said, summarizing the response. "I know that you're concerned for Richard, but we mustn't act rashly."

"True," my dear father reluctantly agreed. Then, scowling, he became lost in thought.

I felt fretful. Every opinion had been perfectly reasonable, but if my house took no action in the immediate future, then my dear sister would certainly rush to my dear brother's side.

Just then, I heard wingbeats from outside the windows. A clamor filled the room.

"That's a Skyhawk Company griffin."

"And covered in wounds. Where did it fly in from?"

I have an awful, dreadful feeling about this.

A loud knock drew all eyes to the door. A clear "I beg your pardon" soon followed, and in stepped a dark-skinned, dark-haired, bespectacled beauty—the maid corps's second-in-command. She seemed quite agitated, a far cry from her usual icy composure.

"Romy, what's happened?!" my dear father demanded.

She replied, "Sir Ryan Bor of the royal guard has just returned from the eastern capital."

H-He must have come on that griffin!

Shock rippled through the hall. Ryan's father, Earl Bor, was thunderstruck.

"Can he speak?" asked my dear mother.

"He seems to have made a strenuous forced march here. I've assigned maids to treat his injuries, but..." Romy looked melancholy as she allowed her words to trail off.

"Your Highness!" Earl Bor roared, striking the table. "News of the eastern capital matters more than my son's health now!"

"Nolan," my dear father responded slowly, "be reasonable. The insurrection began just five days ago. Allow him time to rest before —"

"Excuse me! I brought Ryan!" a cheerful voice announced, sounding out of place in the somber hall. Uncle Lucas's expression soured.

In came Lily, carrying Ryan and a chair in her arms. She then planted the seat on the floor and deposited the knight in it. He was breathing raggedly and looked much the worse for wear, his armor mottled with rents and bloodstains.

"Ryan!" Earl Bor shouted. "Why?! Why did you return alone?! Don't tell me you fled in the face of—"

"Keep it down, please," Lily interrupted, triple-casting the advanced spell Imperial Light Healing on Ryan. "Too much excitement's bad for injuries!"

Uncle Lucas cleared his throat. "Lily, we're in a hurry to hear what Ryan has to report."

"But anyone knows medical treatment comes first!" Lily's tone changed completely as she continued, "Or does Your Highness, Under-duke Lucas Leinster, intend to fault a knight of the royal guard for making a death-defying escape from the eastern capital?"

"Well, no, but..."

Uncle Lucas and the other visiting nobles looked away sheepishly—all except Earl Bor. "Ryan!" he bellowed again. "Answer me! What of Lord Richard?! How do things stand in the eastern—"

Blazing flowers whirled around the earl.

"Oh, please do pipe down," Lily said, smiling. "All those healing spells *still* weren't enough to patch him up, you know? It's pretty obvious that he didn't desert, if you ask me. And besides"—a mighty surge of mana lifted her scarlet hair as she turned to face the assembled commanders—“Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, was in the eastern capital, and no knight who fought with him could be a coward. Isn’t that right, Ryan?”

The glow of healing magic ceased, and Ryan rose from his chair. Some color had returned to his face at last.

“Yes, Your Highnesses,” he said, dropping to one knee and bowing deeply to my dear parents. Then, in hushed tones, he declared, “I am Ryan Bor, a knight of the second company of the royal guard. I have returned to report on the military situation in the eastern capital.”

“Welcome,” my dear father replied. “We’re delighted to see you alive and well.”

“Given that you’ve gone to such lengths to return,” added my dear mother, “I take it that the situation is grave.”

Ryan maintained his posture as he delivered the dreadful tidings:

“The eastern capital has all but fallen. The knights of the royal guard, along with the beastfolk militia and volunteers, still hold the Great Tree, but the enemy possesses overwhelming numbers. If nothing is done, our defeat seems inevitable.”

“Then what are you doing here?!” Earl Bor roared. “You have much to learn, but you could still shield Lord Richard if—”

“I couldn’t!” Ryan shouted without warning. His whole body shook, and his tears stained the floor. “I couldn’t even be a shield. All I managed to do was hold Mr. Allen back. But...But that’s why I need to tell you! You must hear what happened in the eastern capital—how Mr. Allen, Lord Richard, the royal guard, and the beastfolk fought! Please, wait until I’ve finished before passing judgment!”

The Ryan Bor I knew was a mild-mannered gentleman, hardly cut out for military service. But the man before me now, struggling to fulfill his duty even as he wept, was unquestionably a full-fledged knight. A growing dread threatened to overwhelm me.

Just then, I heard the door of the council hall swing open.

“Dear sister!” I cried, racing to her before I knew what I was doing.

She had come dressed in a white nightgown and pale-scarlet cape. Maya trailed behind her, looking worried. Their arrival sparked the greatest commotion in the hall that day.

My dear sister's face was ghastly white. She walked up to Ryan with Maya following in her wake and said, "You fought with him?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the knight replied heavily.

A brief silence fell. Then, "I see. Would you tell me about it?"

"My lady, please have a seat," Maya interjected, bringing over a chair and ushering my dear sister into it.

Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, brought her hands together and closed her eyes, as if in prayer.

Ryan inhaled deeply, then raised his head and began to relate what had transpired that day in the eastern capital.

*

"How much farther, Allen?!"

"We're almost there!" I replied. "The hill is straight ahead!"

Wooden homes blazed all around me as I ran along a backstreet in one of the eastern capital's beastfolk districts, which was in the grip of a growing inferno. With me were Lord Richard Leinster, the red-haired vice commander of the royal guard, and forty-six handpicked knights under his command.

"Have we lost anyone?!" I cried.

"Eleven of us are lightly injured, but we're all still here!" hollered a knight accompanying Richard in the vanguard. He was in the prime of life and sported a magnificent beard.

"Hear that, Supreme Commander Allen, sir?" quipped the vice commander. "Bertrand, are you sure no one's fibbing about how light those injuries are?! No one like, say, Ryan? Or maybe Celerian? Or Ryan?"

"S-Sir!" protested a blushing young knight near the middle of our group.

"D-Don't lump me in with Little Lord Bor," added an annoyed female knight who wore a helmet over her lovely face.

Both had bandaged arms.

This is a good unit, I reflected as the other knights guffawed.

The rebellion of conservative nobles, under the leadership of the Ducal House of Algren, had invited the eastern Knights of the Holy Spirit into the kingdom. By virtue of its creed, this order had no qualms about murdering beastfolk. And so, we found ourselves racing through the burning war zone that people had so recently lauded as the "forest capital" to rescue a group of beastfolk hemmed in by enemies in New Town.

A steady stream of magical creatures kept me apprised of enemy movements. I aimed to avoid battle whenever possible, since the rebel army was well over ten thousand strong. They couldn't bring their full might to bear on us in the narrow streets of the beastfolk districts, but we would still be in trouble if they caught on to us.

A red flare rose from the hill ahead of us. Two more followed at intervals. The signal meant "ambush." I grinned ruefully.

They don't waste any time. I only just sent a bird to alert them.

"Don't you think it's about time you gave it a rest with the magical creatures, Allen?" Richard asked in a low voice as he ran alongside me. "You've been going at it nonstop since this morning. Some of my knights can conjure them too, even if they're nowhere near your level."

"I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine," I replied. "You should all conserve your mana as much as possible."

"Just so we're clear, letting you die isn't on my to-do list."

"What a coincidence—I don't intend to let you die either."

The kindhearted vice commander grinned. But before he could continue the conversation, he suddenly cried, "Allen!"

"I know!"

A storm of the elementary spell Divine Lightning Arrow fired at us from the seemingly empty road ahead. I twirled my staff, tipped with a blade of ice, and deflected the bolts in my path. Richard, meanwhile, conjured a wall of fire. Our defense was faultless, and the knights behind us, unscathed!

I struck my staff on the ground and cast the elementary spell Divine Ice Thorns over a wide area ahead of us. Screams and blood spatter ensued. Then, the massive perception-blocking spell collapsed and revealed a force of heavily armored knights arrayed in the street. I estimated their number at five hundred, at least half of whom carried spell-lances. In the center of their formation sat a strange box, large enough to fit a person inside, which radiated mana. The serpent coiled in briars on their battle standards represented the Earls of Zani, Algren vassals whose line produced some of the east's most renowned sorcerers.

So, this was the ambush.

That odd box in the center, which had concealed the whole force from my scout birds, represented unknown magical technology. I had never heard that the Algrens, the Knights of the Holy Spirit, or the church they represented were particularly accomplished inventors, but—

Oh no!

I poured what little mana I had left into my birds, increasing their sensitivity.

I knew it.

Mentally berating myself for my carelessness, I turned on my heel and shouted, "Richard, you take the group in front! There are more coming from behind us! We need to act quickly, or we'll be surrounded!"

"I'm on it!" the startled vice commander hollered back. "Bertrand, take Second Platoon and do whatever Allen tells you to! First, Third, and Fourth Platoons, follow me!"

"Yes, sir!" The royal guard immediately sprang into action.

I rushed to the rear of our group and thrust out my staff, pushing the velocity of the elementary spell Divine Light Arrow to its limit as I sniped the still-invisible box. I heard something break, and then the enemy force appeared. They slightly outnumbered their compatriots up ahead and likewise flew Earl Zani's standard.

At the center of the enemy line stood an elderly man, lightly armored, wielding a spell-lance and wearing a broad-brimmed sorcerer's hat. He cast a glance at the shattered box, then turned his piercing gaze on me.

"I am Earl Zaur Zani!" he proclaimed. "You have done well to make it this far, but we have you surrounded! Surrender!"

Earl Zani was a sorcerer of the good old days, and his offer bespoke a modicum of dignity.

I bowed slightly while readying a spell in my staff. "I appreciate your courteous offer, but I must firmly decline. Tell me: if someone had set *your* home ablaze, would you lay down your arms without a fight at their request? My, how the sorcerous House of Zani has fallen."

"How dare you?!" screamed one of the elderly sorcerer's lieutenants, a young sorceress who wore her long brown hair up. "Open fire!"

"Sandra!" the earl cried. But he was too late—my taunt had done its work!

One after another, the knights thrust their spell-lances out from behind their shields and deployed Divine Lightning Arrows.

This is our opening!

I insinuated myself into a portion of their spell formulae, triggering bursts of electricity that rained down on the enemy ranks. Next, I cast the elementary spells Divine Earth Mire and Divine Water Thorns beneath their feet. The confused knights sank into the mud, while watery spines further hindered their movements. What's more…

"These are no ordinary thorns!" came a panicked cry. "They're poisoned!"

"I'm g-going numb."

Now!

"Bertrand!" I shouted, conjuring a fresh blade of ice on my staff as I raced forward.

"Second Platoon, advance!" barked the veteran knight behind me.

My mana was already nearly depleted, but I scraped together enough to conjure just four floating Divine Ice Mirrors. I then closed in on an isolated group of enemies, which I had deliberately left outside the radius of the explosions and my spells. Three quick sweeps of my staff elicited two grunts and a faltering "S-So fast…" as I bisected the spell-lances and shields of three knights in their vanguard. The swordplay that the albatross had mercilessly drilled into me had its uses.

The knights on either side were slow to react as I spun and cast Divine Light Arrows, targeting the gaps in their armor. Light spells were the fastest of all offensive magics, which made evading them at point-blank range a challenge—especially for startled opponents. Several foes proved unable to react and fell to their knees, injured and grimacing in pain.

"Curse you!" An as-yet unscathed knight thrust his spell-lance at me, only for Bertrand's sword to cleave it in two. A follow-up kick from the veteran landed on the knight's shield but still sent him flying.

Then, another thirteen members of the royal guard joined the fray, driving the foe back and securing our position.

"Don't focus on finishing them off!" Bertrand barked as he took up a defensive position a short distance ahead of me. "Injure them and buy time while Richard clears a path for us! Ryan, Celerian! Don't trip up Mr. Allen in your rush to make a name for yourselves!"

"Yes, sir!" most of the guard responded, although I also heard Ryan's incredulous "Sir Bertrand?!" and Celerian's aggrieved "I don't intend to."

I really was fond of this unit, although I wished that they would stop calling me "Mr."

Mana pulsed ahead and to the side of us. I moved my Divine Ice Mirrors to reflect and neutralize the intermediate spell Divine Lightning Spear. Its caster, the sorceress called Sandra, turned pale.

"Not a bad idea, but your execution was lacking. Simple frontal, linear activation is child's play to see through," I remarked, twirling my staff in a show of self-assurance. Between the successive battles that I had been fighting since early morning and the effects of linking mana with Caren, I was feeling far from my best.

Earl Zani looked me in the eye. "You used magical creatures to forestall our ambush, you took control of others' spells, you deflected Sandra's magic with ease, and you excel in both magical finesse and melee combat." He paused. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Brain of the Lady of the Sword."

"I'm surprised you know of me. Not many people do," I replied, partly as a play for time.

I felt a hot wind on my back. Richard was worn down from continuous fighting too. He would find it difficult to overcome an overwhelming numerical disadvantage and speedily clear a path in a frontal assault. I only hoped that a certain someone realized that soon.

"Everyone has heard of the Lady of the Sword herself, of course," I added, cautiously weaving more spells.

"I had my doubts until I saw you with my own eyes, but it appears Lord Gil spoke the truth," the elderly sorcerer responded. "You must realize that you cannot defeat us in your condition. If you prolong this battle, you will die."

He sounded certain. I should have expected a veteran like him to see through my bluffs. I seemed to recall Gil Algren, my former schoolmate at the Royal University, once mentioning that "Old Zaur trained with dad, Haag, and Hayden, although he was a bit younger than them." I was in real trouble.

"Yes, I will," I admitted, resting a hand on my forehead and sighing. "But to that, I can only repeat the question I put to you earlier. Is this mess what you hoped your magical research would lead to?"

The earl lowered the brim of his hat and held his spell-lance aloft. “It seems the time for idle words has passed,” he said in a low voice. “Prepare for a full, simultaneous bombardment. Prioritize numbers, not power. That man’s mastery is formidable, yet he is still but a single, tired sorcerer. Overwhelm him and wear him down!”

“Yes, sir!” The enemy knights thrust out their spell-lances and deployed more Divine Lightning Arrows than I could count. To my annoyance, the elderly sorcerer’s orders were spot-on.

Bertrand and the other knights of the royal guard looked drawn. Three casts of the advanced spell Imperial Thunder Lance, famed for its penetrating power, were taking shape on the tip of Earl Zani’s spell-lance. To make matters worse, his formulae were encrypted—an advanced technique that would increase the drain on my mana if I tried to interfere with them.

The barrage of Divine Lightning Arrows would fire first. If I hijacked those formulae, the advanced spells would strike me down, and vice versa.

Good grief. I always seem to wind up between a rock and a hard place. God must really have it in for me.

I grinned at my rotten luck and tightened my grip on my staff. Its scarlet and azure ribbons waved as if to cheer me on. Behind me, the royal guard prepared defensive spells as well.

The elderly sorcerer narrowed his eyes. “Impressive. Take aim!”

“I...I can take him!” Ryan suddenly shouted, breaking into a run before the earl could issue his next order. He was deploying the sturdiest magical defense he could muster.

“Ryan, no!” Celerian darted out after him, flinging her helmet aside to reveal her ears, which were long, although not quite as long as an elf’s. Her beautiful hair, the palest possible shade of red, fluttered behind her.

I immediately signaled to Bertrand with a glance, then swathed my feet in lightning and wind magic and sprinted forward.

“Fire!” bellowed Earl Zani.

The enemy line loosed its arrows of lightning. I cast thirteen Divine Ice Mirrors, the most that I could currently maintain at once. Spells ricocheted off them as I overtook Ryan and Celerian and flung the startled pair backward with wind magic. Bertrand and the other veterans used earth spells to dig a trench in mere moments. They even raised dozens of stone walls ahead of me to provide support while they retreated into their impromptu fortification.

One by one, my ice mirrors shattered under the assault. The stone walls were crumbling as well, but the enemy spells kept coming.

Then, I sensed powerful mana. The elderly mage brought down his spell-lance and fired his three Imperial Thunder Lances, shouting, “Prepare yourself, legend of the new generation! Weather my full might if you can!”

“I’m no legend!” I hollered back, straining.

If I dodge, his spells will hit the royal guard. I need to block them!

I silently imbued my staff with my pseudo-Azure Sword and a new experimental spell that I hadn’t even named yet, then dismantled as few of the spells hurtling toward me as I could afford to. As for the rest, I only spared a thought for bolts that would have gravely or fatally injured me as I kept swinging my glowing azure staff, holding out for all I was worth. The stone walls were already gone, and I was running out of mirrors.

I diverted the first Imperial Thunder Lance with my staff and my last mirror, then forced my way through the second’s encryption to dismantle it. The third spell...was a delayed activation! This one would hit me unless help arrived.

A shout split the air as, just in the nick of time, a tall beastfolk man leapt down from the roof of a burning building. His feet shone bright white as he drove a flying kick into the advanced spell, which careened into a house with a thunderous crash. The young fox-clan man, who wore a pale-blue martial arts uniform, landed in a fighting stance, his ears and tail bristling.

“Hello, Sui,” I hailed my savior while showering myself in elementary healing magic. “You couldn’t have made a better entrance. Did you time it on purpose?”

“I swear I’m gonna slug you later, Allen,” snapped my old friend. But although he was seething, his determination to defend me was unmistakable.

Ahead of us, the barrage from the enemy line died off. They were still trying to fire, but their spell formulae kept collapsing of their own accord.

“What is this?” the elderly sorcerer murmured, scowling.

“Master!” the sorceress cried. “I...I can’t cast! Some strange encryption is disrupting my formulae!”

I’d call that a success.

Duchess Rosa Howard, the mother of my students Tina and Stella, had left behind the diary of a formidable sorceress. I had adapted its encryption for my own purposes. The resulting spell automatically encrypted my enemies' formulae and caused their magic to fizzle out, but it was still a work in progress and the encryption itself was simple. Old Earl Zani would be able to undo it easily.

I was reflecting that any further combat would prove difficult when my communication orb sprang to life. "Allen, the militia is with us!" Richard shouted. "We're breaking through on this side! Come quick!"

I raised my left hand slightly. The knights of the royal guard, who had already climbed out of their trench, started running.

My gaze met the elderly sorcerer's. "This is the end for now," I said. "Sui!"

"On it!"

We joined in the retreat as fast as our legs would carry us.

"Brain of the Lady of the Sword!" boomed the earl's voice from behind me. "Why?! Why do you fight so tenaciously for the beastfolk?!"

That's a good question. For my mom, dad, and sister, I suppose. And for my promise to that little girl, Ine. Apart from that...

I recalled a blameless fox-clan girl who had died when I was very young. But conflating Ine and Atra was just fooling myself.

Well, most importantly...

"I can't let my friend and my junior fellow disciple die without me," I murmured as the enemy knights resumed their barrage of spells.

"Allen?" came Richard's nonplussed voice from my communication orb.

"Hey! Did you say something?!" Sui demanded, looking over his shoulder.

I shook my head. "Not a thing. Now, let's run for it!"

Chapter 3

The remaining residents of New Town had evacuated to a hilltop that the militia used as a storehouse and emergency meeting place. Reaching it from the north, east, or south required one to scale a slope. Rugged terrain and dense flora made its western face unsuitable for a military advance. It was an easy place to hole up in...and an easy place to find oneself besieged.

No sooner had Sui and I finished our struggle up the southern slope than a pale light began shrouding the entire hilltop. I looked around and spotted several trees. Some of their leaves and branches appeared withered.

"A tactical barrier using saplings of the Great Tree as a medium?" I mused. "I'm amazed you've held out. You must need multiple masters of botanical magic just to activate this."

"We had our former chieftains with us!" Sui glared at me, seized me by the collar, and growled, "You've got some nerve, Allen. Pulling a crazy stunt like that could've—" Then, the color drained from his face and he raised his voice in panic. "Y-You're all busted up! You've been fighting like this?! G-Get us a healer, quick! And a chair! Oh man, you're bleeding everywhere..."

"Sui, you're shouting," I said. "Calm down. You're a militia chapter leader, and—"

"Can it!"

What's become of all that daring he just showed rescuing me?

My older junior fellow disciple was in a panic. His ears were pressed flat to his head as he frantically tore strips from his own clothing and pressed them to my wounds. Blood soaked through the scraps. As I relaxed, pain racked my body from head to toe.

A goat-clan woman wearing light armor and a militia insignia tied around her left arm hurried over. A woman from the royal guard arrived at almost the same time. Both were clearly still in their teens.

A rat-clan militiaman of my acquaintance brought me a chair. "Allen, thank goodness you've come!" he exclaimed, weeping profusely. “We stand a chance of getting the women and children out now.”

The nearby militia members were also shedding tears. The elderly, however, mostly gave us cold looks.

I sat in the provided chair, then the young women inspected my wounds and grimaced.

“How awful,” one remarked.

“He’s covered in cuts,” said the other.

The soft glow of healing magic immediately enveloped my body.

“Please fill me in on the situation,” I asked Sui in the meantime. He failed to respond. “Sui! Calm down. Why didn’t you evacuate to the Great Tree?”

“O-Oh, right!” Sui snapped out of his daze and launched into an explanation. “We set out for the Great Tree at first. But then, out of the blue, we got a magical communication from there. It said, ‘The eastern bridge is already down! Make for high ground!’”

“Who gave that order?”

Sui hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t follow.”

I tried to rise, but the young women scolded me to “Stay put!” How strict they were. I settled for looking Sui in the eye, and he hung his head.

“I don’t know,” he repeated. “All the chieftains were at the Great Tree, and the message was in a code only they can use. The ex-chieftains heard it too. That’s why we believed it. I bet Rolo, Toma, or Shima could’ve seen through it...but not me.” His shoulders trembled with shame.

“Sui.” I reached out an aching hand and lightly bumped my fist against his chest. “No tears, please. You always were a crybaby.”

“Sh-Shut up!” the young man snapped, drying his eyes with his sleeve.

This exchange brought back memories. He had wept during martial arts lessons too. I recalled our master doing exactly as I had just done and saying, “Men hold back their tears.”

As my treatment continued, I recovered enough to look around. Most of the evacuees were of the fox clan. I also saw members of New Town’s weasel, goat, and ox clans, although few of the rat clan. No humans were among them. The red-haired vice commander of the royal guard, whose treatment had already finished, filled me in on the details.

“Allen, there are about three hundred residents here in all, and one hundred militia.”

A moment of silence followed. At last, I repeated, “One hundred?”

Rolo of the leopard clan was leading a main force of approximately three hundred in defense of the Great Tree. The militia as a whole was roughly five hundred strong. So, in defense of the citizenry, everyone still unaccounted for had...

I see. So that’s how it is.

“Sui, I take it you understand our predicament?” I asked, forcing myself to keep a cool head despite my mounting fury. “We’re cut off, and there are Knights of the Holy Spirit in the enemy ranks.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sui replied sourly. “We’ll all die if we stay here! That’s why I said we should make a break for it. Not that anyone listened.”

“You mean you didn’t launch those three red flares?” I asked, startled.

The signal that I had seen from the Great Tree meant “Ambush. Stay away. Abandon us.” In other words, it was a last goodbye.

“The ex-chieftains launched the first bunch!” Sui spat. “I trained under the same master as you! Like hell I’d ever throw in the towel!” A bit sheepishly, he added, “That last batch was me, though.”

Richard and I exchanged looks. This sounded like trouble.

I made another attempt to stand up, only to be met with cries of “Not yet, Mr. Allen!” and “We still need to inspect your wounds!”

“Oh, but I’m already—”

“Sit still!”

The young women’s fierce looks silenced my protests. I raised my hands in surrender as they gravely set about examining me. The nearby onlookers wore faint smiles.

That reminds me—I don’t see Sui’s lovely, raven-haired bride-to-be.

“Sui, where is Momiji?” I asked. “Isn’t she with you?”

“We split up,” he said slowly. “I told her to go to the Great Tree. You didn’t run into her there?”

“Thousands of people are taking shelter there, and I set out almost as soon as I arrived.” I felt vaguely uneasy. And at times like this, my bad feelings proved accurate.

The young women snapped to attention and delivered their report:

"All of your wounds have closed, sir."

"But you still shouldn't be anywhere near a battlefield with your injuries."

"Thank you very much," I said. "You've done enough. May I ask your names?"

"I'm V-Valery," the human replied. "I was assigned to the royal guard after graduating from knight school this spring."

"A-And I'm Shizuku," added the young goat-clan woman. "Sui's always talking about all the things you've done, so—"

"Quiet, Shizuku!" Sui hastily cut in. "She's a local kid. Only sixteen, but she's got skill."

I nodded in agreement with his assessment. Shizuku bashfully lowered her gaze.

"Valery's sixteen too," Richard added. "The youngest knight in the history of the guard."

"That's quite an achievement," I said, genuinely impressed.

The young lady knight blushed. Then, two frigid voices interrupted our conversation.

"What are you doing there?"

"Sui! Give us your report!"

I turned to see the former chieftains of the fox and goat clans regarding me bitterly.

"Oh, it's only you old-timers," Sui replied. "I was just about to head your way."

"Why did you lead half the militia here into battle without our permission?!" one demanded.

"Don't act on your own initiative!" added the other.

Sui's eyes narrowed and his tail bristled. The other militia members gave the former chieftains glacial looks.

"Excuse me?" he responded belligerently. "What are you trying to say? Allen and the royal guard came to rescue us. Did you want us to just sit back and watch them get torn apart in that ambush?"

One of the former chieftains snorted. "We don't need human help!"

"We made our wishes clear to the chieftains when we launched those—"

"Sorry, but could I have a word with you?" Richard interrupted, smiling.

The former chieftains' expressions stiffened.

"Wh-What?"

"W-We've nothing to discuss!"

"I'd like to go over a few things with you," the red-haired knight continued. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Richard Leinster, vice commander of the royal guard."

That rattled the two elders. In terms of social standing, Richard far outranked them. He was entitled to the style "Highness," while a beastfolk chieftaincy was equivalent to a baronial title.

"Now, let's take this elsewhere," the vice commander continued, wrapping his arms around the elders' shoulders. "Sui, lead the way. Allen, get some rest."

"Sure," Sui responded. He set off toward a building, and Richard followed with the former chieftains in tow.

In the meantime, I decided to ask the nearby people for a favor.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for someone. Is there a little fox-clan girl here? She has a younger sister named Ine."

*

I sat in my chair, darting my pen across a map. As I'd expected, withdrawal would not be impossible. But without the help of Deg and Dag, the former chieftain and deputy chieftain of the otter clan, my plan was worth no more than the paper I was drawing it on.

I dispatched a bird to contact them at the Great Tree. I had spoken to Deg before setting out, so hopefully—

"Mr. Allen." Bertrand's voice interrupted my thoughts. The bearded veteran approached me, leading two young knights—Ryan and Celerian. Both looked nervous.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"These two have something to say to you."

Suddenly, the junior knights knelt and cried, "We hindered you in battle earlier! Please accept our humble apologies!"

Finding myself at a loss, I looked to Bertrand for help...but the battle-hardened knight merely smirked and strode off.

"Check your arms and rest!" he barked at the rest of the guard. "Soon enough, you'll be back in the thick of a battle that'll make you wish you were dead! I trust you've all learned to fear our supreme commander!"

That wasn't very nice.

"Please stop that," I told the pair, who were still kneeling. "Have you learned your lesson?"

After a moment, Ryan replied, "Yes, sir. I was too eager for glory."

"I acted rashly," Celerian added.

"Then all is forgiven," I said.

Ryan and Celerian looked up in surprise.

"What?"

"But sir..."

I shrugged. "In my experience, berating the repentant does little good. Sui and I saved you this time, but who knows what the future will bring? That said..." I flashed a teasing grin at the pair, who wore matching bands on their right ring fingers. "If you're so desperate to protect each other, a bit more communication wouldn't hurt."

Ryan and Celerian froze and flushed bright red. The other knights of the guard, who had been listening in, took the opportunity to make their voices heard.

"You sure are quick on the uptake, Mr. Allen, sir!"

"Damn Ryan! He's got all the luck in love!"

"But that goes for Mr. Allen too, doesn't it?"

"The young noblewomen are all over him."

"True. Even Valery's started to fall for him."

"D-Don't be ridiculous!"

The royal guard, it seemed, offered an entertaining work environment.

"Don't be too quick to risk your lives," I said, clapping Ryan and Celerian on the shoulder. "Keep struggling to the bitter end."

"Yes, sir!" they responded in unison.

"Allen! I found her!" Shizuku called, running up to me with her tail wagging. Her excitement made her look even younger than she was.

Behind her were a pair of fox-clan girls clasping each other's hands. The younger of the two had flaxen hair and looked to be four or five years old, while the older, gray-haired girl couldn't have been more than ten. They looked nothing alike.

The younger girl stared intently at my face. Then her eyes widened, and she exclaimed, "Oh, you did magic for me yesterday!"

"That's right. I'm so glad you're safe and sound." I gave the child a gentle pat on the head and felt a lump rise in my throat when I noticed the light scrapes on her arms and legs. Then, kneeling down on the ground, I said, “Ine asked me to come fetch you. Would you tell me your name?”

“Ine did?” she repeated. “I’m Chiho!”

“That’s a lovely name.” I turned to the older girl. “And you are?”

“Well...Chiho couldn’t find her family, so I just...”

“I see. Thank you,” I said, bowing deeply. “I’m truly grateful.”

Her lovely black eyes widened, and a shiver ran through her.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“I...I know who you are,” she replied.

“Who I am?”

Chiho reached out her hands to me, so I gave her a hug.

Meanwhile, the older girl continued to stare straight at me. I realized that her eyes were actually different colors—the left black and the right gray. “You placed second on your Royal Academy entrance exam despite being beastfolk, and you graduated second in your class a year later,” she said. “Then, you enrolled in the university. And at the same time, you performed more feats of arms than I can count alongside Lady Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword.”

“You have quite an advanced vocabulary,” I remarked.

“I’ve always looked up to you...”

“Come again?” I was taken aback, having never expected to hear those words from anyone except Tina, Ellie, and Stella.

“Oh, so do I!” Shizuku piped up. “I’ve always admired—”

“Not so loud, please,” interjected a weasel-clan militiawoman, clamping a hand over her excitable comrade’s mouth.

“You look up to *me*, not the Lady of the Sword?” I asked while I stroked Chiho’s head.

“Yes, I do,” the girl replied. “I’m...I’m an orphan. So, for the longest time, I thought that I couldn’t have much of a future. But not anymore. The head of my orphanage always tells us how hard you’re working, and that made me think that maybe even I could become a sorceress if I put in enough effort.” Her face bore a look of maturity and determination.

I couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t quite know what to say at times like this...but I appreciate the sentiment, and I’d like to give you a token of my gratitude. Would you hold out your hands? And Chiho, I’d like you to watch too.”

"A-All right."

The girl's hands were stained with dirt and blood. I cleaned them with a water spell, then conjured tiny spheres of all eight elements on her palm. She let out a cry of wonder, and Chiho murmured, "So pretty" as I set the balls into rapid motion. With the addition of a somewhat larger, encompassing sphere, I constructed a miniature celestial globe.

"If you want to become a sorceress," I said, "practice the simplest spells every single day. Keep that up, and eventually you'll be able to do this too."

"Every day?" she repeated.

"You can't improve overnight, but you'll make just a little progress after a week of practice. Try doing that for a month, then three, then six, and then a year or more. That will start you down the road to becoming a fine spellcaster."

The girl looked stunned for a moment. Then: "I'll do it. I promise! And, um, if...if I make it into the Royal Academy—"

"Mr. Allen, sir!" Bertrand shouted. My rest, it seemed, was at an end.

"It sounds like I have work to do. Please take good care of this one," I said to the older girl as I set Chiho down.

"I will!" she responded.

"Mister?" said Chiho.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "Everything will be all right."

After giving both children a pat on the head, I walked off and took up a position beside Bertrand. "Did that seem like an empty gesture to you?" I quietly asked.

"No, sir," he replied without hesitation. "I've no doubt that the memory of you and your words will support those children on their paths through life. I believe that people with such experience have the strength to rise."

"Thank you. Now, let's be on our way. I assume we're going to join Richard and the former chieftains?"

As I spoke, I suddenly recalled a story that one of my underclassmen at the university had once told me. "One time, when I was little, my dad took me to the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit," he had said. "While I was there, I used my own money to buy two girls out of slavery. Afterward, my dad slugged me. He called it an 'empty gesture' and wanted to know what I planned to do for all the people who were still enslaved. But I didn't do it for any special reason. I set those two free on the spur of the moment, without giving it much thought. I've never seen 'em since."

Gil, now I know just how you felt.

I had simply done as I pleased, for no reason in particular. And I wouldn't regret it. As a child, I had been powerless to act when my friend Atra died.

"Bertrand," I said, "would you do me an unpleasant favor?"

*

Furious voices emanated from the militia's hilltop storehouse.

"Allen and I trained under the same master!" Sui bellowed. "Nobody gets away with insulting him like that!"

I shot a pointed look at Bertrand and the other knights and militia members who had joined us on the walk over. Then, I entered the building alone.

"Sui, keep your voice down," I said. "I could hear you from outside."

He looked startled. "Allen..."

Six men occupied the storehouse, their seats clustered around a table with a map laid out on it. I counted the former chieftains of the fox, weasel, goat, and ox clans—the rat clan's representative was missing. Richard sat silently with his arms folded, while Sui was in a towering rage.

The former chieftains turned to shout at me.

"Who gave you leave to come in here?!"

"We are in the middle of an important debate!"

"Humans have no business here—especially one without rank or title!"

"Get out!"

Sui imbued his limbs with mana and glared murder at them. "Sounds like it'll take a brush with death to knock some sense into you," he growled.

Despised in the royal capital, and now excluded in my hometown? I couldn't suppress a bitter smile.

"You know, Allen..." Richard broke his silence.

"Yes?"

"I've been wondering: are this lot really beastfolk? The same goes for the chieftains up in the Great Tree."

The former chieftains spluttered furiously.

"What?!"

"You speak too freely!"

"Even for a Leinster!"

"Of course we are beastfolk!"

"In that case," the red-haired knight continued calmly, a look of genuine puzzlement on his face, "you must not be the same beastfolk I heard bedtime stories about—the ones who never give in, value honor, and defend their families and children at any cost. Do you have any idea how many lives Allen has saved today alone? Your wives, children, and grandchildren might be among them. Can you even conceive of that? Or are the leaders of the beastfolk nothing but a gaggle of fools?"

Richard's invective made the former chieftains stiffen and elicited a murmured "Yikes" from Sui.

"During the War of the Dark Lord, my own House of Leinster charged into battle alongside the Howards of the north and the beastfolk brigade led by the legendary Shooting Star. Our traditions preserve how bravely and fiercely they fought, so I'd say we know more about the beastfolk than most nobles. But Allen was raised among you. He's running himself ragged to defend you all. And here you sit, trying to get rid of him." The red-haired knight slowly rose to his feet and slammed his fist down onto the table. A wrathful blaze flickered in his eyes. "I don't know what happened in the past. You probably have your reasons for mistrusting humans. But Allen's not part of that history, is he? What gives you the right to disparage him when you've done nothing while he's shed blood?"

The former chieftains blanched and looked away. They knew as well as we did that they merely wanted someone to vent their frustration at.

Richard gripped his sword hilt and roared, "Allen is my friend, and I, Richard Leinster, am in his debt! An insult to him is an insult to me—more than just cause for me to cut you down where you sit!"

"Richard, let it rest. But thank you," I said. Then, to the former chieftains, "Sui informed me that you made the decision to signal your last farewell. Why?"

The elders responded sheepishly.

"For the honor of the beastfolk. False intelligence led us to retreat here, and we bitterly regret it."

“We stood little chance of reaching the Great Tree with the women and children, and we despaired of rescue.”

“So we hoped, at least, not to dishonor our ancestors.”

“The barrier generated by the saplings of the Great Tree is unbreachable. We hoped to hold out.”

At last, they had begun to speak their true feelings.

“Unfortunately, there are no absolutes in this world of ours,” I coldly informed them. “No barrier is impenetrable, and this one will assuredly break before the day is out. The saplings are already suffering from exhaustion.” I drew a withered leaf from my robes and placed it on the table. It was utterly drained of mana.

Tense looks came over the former chieftains.

“We...We can’t disgrace ourselves here, in the land of the Great Tree!” the fox-clan elder cried. “Rather than fall ignobly as we slink away, we should die gloriously in—”

“I don’t doubt that the beastfolk’s good name is precious,” I interjected, preparing to strike the old men with all the verbal force I could muster, “but I can’t countenance throwing away children’s futures to preserve it. What could be more shameful than sacrificing promising young lives on the altar of honor? The infamy would endure for decades—centuries—to come. If you’ve forgotten what shame is, then you are no longer the beastfolk I know.”

The former chieftains said not a word. This seemed as good a time as any to unveil my plan of retreat.

When I finished speaking, the elders were even more shaken than I had seen them thus far.

“I-Is that even possible?”

“I don’t believe it can be done.”

“And if it can, think of the saplings.”

“We would need the cooperation of the otter clan and the others who run the waterways.”

“We’ve passed the point of considering what’s possible,” I said. “We’ll do it because we must. I’ve already received a favorable response from Deg and Dag, the former leaders of the otter clan. They say that other clans will contribute their gondolas and skiffs as well.”

The former chieftains of the weasel, goat, and ox clans exchanged looks. Their faces were ghastly pale, but they nodded their agreement.

"And who will bring up the rear in this plan of yours?!" the fox-clan elder demanded, pounding on the table and kicking his chair aside. "It's a suicide mission!"

Oh, is that all?

I chuckled in spite of myself and replied simply, "I will, of course."

My explanation concluded, I stared down the hill's southern slope at the myriad fluttering standards of the enemy army. Hostile forces crowded thickly to the north and east as well. The Knights of the Holy Spirit, from whom we had the most to fear, held a position east of the hill. Their eerily silent troops had yet to show any sign of movement.

Comparing our strengths was a waste of effort. In a pitched battle, our annihilation would be inevitable. Not even the royal guard could triumph over the sheer force of numbers.

Despite my bold words to the former chieftains, we would be leaving much to chance. If I failed, many women, elders, and children would die. My heart shrank under the pressure. I drew a deep breath, then touched a sapling's trunk. Slowly, my mind settled into tranquility.

There's nothing to be afraid of. I can do this.

"Well now, this is quite a view. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

I turned and grimaced. There stood the vice commander of the royal guard, along with Bertrand and all of Second Platoon.

"Richard, I believe I asked you to fight in the vanguard," I said. "And your knights should be there with you."

"There's no sign of the foe to our west, and Sui is there to lead the charge," Richard countered. "Practically speaking, you're nearly out of mana and in no shape to guard our rear alone. You wouldn't believe the trouble I had narrowing down your reinforcements—the whole guard volunteered, and so did the militia." Abruptly, he dropped his casual tone. Scratching his nose, he awkwardly continued, "Listen, Allen, I know this isn't the best time to ask...but what would you say to becoming a Leinster? Ideally as Lydia's husband, but if you're not happy with that, we could always start a new branch house for you. I know everyone would love to have you as family."

I was stunned. "Richard, what are you—"

He rested his right hand on my shoulder and fixed me with a deadly serious stare. “You need to rise in the world. Tutoring young ladies is fine for the moment, but...” Richard’s face split in a broad grin, and he made a slight gesture with his left hand, indicating that I should look around.

I did so. Ryan, Celerian, other young knights, a host of militia I didn’t know, and even children were looking at me.

Richard winked. “You give people hope, Allen. The militia, our fresh recruits, and, most importantly, the children all admire and believe in you. You have what it takes to be their guiding light.”

“Oh, but...” The unexpected praise left me at a loss for words. It was all I could do to force a smile and say, “I’m not cut out for that. I have my hands full looking after Lydia and the girls.”

Then, a little bird winged down to me.

“I believe it’s time,” I announced.

“Remember—Richard Leinster owes you. Saving my sister was no small feat, and I’ll go to almost any lengths to repay you for it,” Richard said. “Oh, but please don’t ask me to challenge my mother, grandmother, or Anna.”

“I’d rather not attempt that either.”

We shared a laugh. Then, I struck the ground with the butt of my staff. Light raced from it, linking my mana to that of the saplings.

“Let’s begin!” Richard barked. “Knights of the royal guard, are you ready?!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Now!” I shouted as I insinuated myself into the barrier and joined with it, imparting direction to the vast quantity of mana. After concentrating the power, I fired it on all sides. Searing pain assailed me as I controlled the rain of light. My little birds allowed me to observe the effects of my bombardment and target as many enemy units as possible. At the same time, I mowed down the trees on the western hill, clearing a path through the dense growth.

A bright light flashed, followed by a thunderous roar and a blast of wind. The saplings were rapidly withering.

Sui launched signal flares skyward—blue, blue, blue. “Commencing operation.” The message would be clearly visible from the Great Tree.

Forgive me, I silently pleaded, laying a hand on the trunk of a withered sapling and closing my eyes for just a fraction of a moment. Then, I called, “Sui!”

“Get moving, you lot!” my friend yelled. “On the honor of the beastfolk militia, don’t leave anyone behind!”

“Right!” the militia chorused. Then, they formed up into a wedge, with Sui at the tip and the citizenry in the center, and set off down the newly cleared western slope as fast as they were able.

Richard drew his sword and surveyed the enemy forces, which were attempting to regroup and advance despite the chaos. “Now, let’s give them our best,” he said. “I’d like a drink of fine wine when this is over!”

“As president of Allen & Co., I’ll find you the very finest,” I promised.

I readied my staff and he, his sword. The knights assumed fighting stances as well. Battle after battle had pushed us nearly to our limits, but that wouldn’t stop us!

“In that case,” Richard said as he and I faced the enemy line already advancing up the southern slope, “I’d better put in enough work to cover a bottle or two!”

“I’ve lost count of the honors we’ve earned today, but it’s time to add another!”

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“Hurry, but don’t rush! Keep your heads! Children first, then women, and then elders!”

“Right!”

By the time we in the rear guard caught up to the rest of the group, they had already begun their evacuation to the Great Tree. Here, on the outskirts of New Town, we had used magic to construct a temporary landing place at the entrance of the underground canals. As I watched, a fleet of large and medium-sized gondolas was pushing off and vanishing into the tunnel, all loaded with people. Only the beastfolk knew the layout of the city’s subterranean waterways. I doubted that our enemies would continue their pursuit inside.

A grizzled old otter was issuing orders to the assorted gondoliers. As we passed, he looked up and cried, “Allen!”

“Thank you for all your help, Dag,” I responded. “Did you really need to come in person?”

The former deputy chieftain of the otter clan guffawed. “’Course

I did!" In a more somber tone, he added, "Deg and the other former chieftains are having it out with the pack of fools on the council now. They've given up on using the Old Pledge to bring the Algrens to the bargaining table, but now they can't agree whether to raise the Great Tree's barrier."

The Old Pledge was a covenant that had been forged between the beastfolk and the Ducal Houses of Algren and Lebufera in the aftermath of the War of the Dark Lord. The Algrens, however, seemed to have abandoned their end of the bargain.

"How long do you think it will take to evacuate everyone?" I asked.

"We're working as fast as we can. Still..." Dag gestured to the crowd of people waiting on the dock and on the stairs and street ahead of it.

I nodded. "I understand. We're counting on you."

"And you won't regret it!" Dag reassured me.

No sooner had I turned away from him than Valery and Shizuku ran up to me. The former cried, "Mr. Allen! You need immediate treatment!" while the latter added, "Someone get a chair! On the double!"

"Please, don't bother," I said. "I'll help to fortify our position with—"

"Absolutely not!" the pair responded in unison. They then forced me into a wooden chair taken from a nearby house and began tending to my wounds.

I was in tatters, to put it mildly. My mana was all but exhausted, and although I had avoided serious injuries, I had sustained more minor wounds than I could count. The succession of fierce battles had also taken a toll on my spellcasting precision, and I could maintain only a scant few magical creatures. Detailed reconnaissance was now beyond me.

"Sir, permit me to express my opinion as a knight and a healer," Valery pleaded. "Please refrain from any further combat!"

"Allen, you've done enough," Shizuku added. "More than enough! Let us take it from here!"

Both young women looked on the verge of tears.

"I appreciate your concern," I responded. "But please, let me keep working. There's only a little left to do."

They fell silent, tears welling in their eyes as their healing glow intensified.

I'm so clumsy when it comes to dealing with women.

Then, I spotted the two fox-clan girls in the line of people waiting for the boats. Thank goodness they were safe.

The younger child met my gaze, and her face instantly brightened. "Mister!" she cried, racing over and flinging her arms around me.

"Whoa there!" I said. "Hello, Chiho. How are you?"

"Great!" Suddenly, tears filled her eyes. "Do you have a boo-boo? Does it hurt?"

"I'm fine," I replied, tenderly rubbing her head. "These nice ladies are making it better for me."

"Really?"

"Really. Now, run along. You wouldn't want to miss your boat." I set her down, and she hung her head. The older girl approached, but she looked about to cry as well.

"Won't you ride with us?" Chiho asked quietly.

"I'll be on the last boat. You don't have to worry about me," I told them, then looked at the older girl. "Um..."

"Lotta," she supplied.

"Lotta, please take good care of Chiho. I saw her mother and sister at the Great Tree, so look for them there. The militia will help if you tell them that you're doing a favor for Allen."

"I will!" Tears spilled from her eyes as she repeated, more quietly, "I will."

Valery and Shizuku were holding back sobs, although their healing spells never faltered.

I stood, knelt down, and placed my hand on Lotta's head. "Please don't cry. Let's meet in the royal capital someday—I'm looking forward to seeing you enroll in the Royal Academy."

"All right," she said slowly. "I'll...I'll see you there!"

"Now, please get going. Chiho, I'll show you more fun magic the next time I see you."

"Okay," Chiho agreed. Then, Lotta took her little hand, and they returned to the line. A nearby weasel-clan couple pressed their fists to their chests and nodded emphatically. The girls would be safe with them.

The healing glow faded. "Thank you very much," I said to the young women. "Now, both of you, please board the gondolas."

Their responses were immediate: "I refuse!" and "We'll see this through!"

"You will not," I informed them. "Richard, do you have any other knights in their teens?"

"Only her," came the swift reply. "Valery Lockheart, withdraw to the Great Tree ahead of us. This is a formal order from your vice commander."

"But sir!"

"And who is your youngest, Sui?" I asked.

"Shizuku," the militia chapter leader answered without hesitation. "Quit whining and get moving!"

"But Sui!"

I crouched slightly to look the talented young women in the eye. "You'll be retreating to yet another demanding battlefield. I promise that we'll return to join you there."

The teary-eyed pair said nothing in response, but they nodded and obediently turned toward the dock. Their hearts were in the right place.

I swiftly joined Richard and Sui, who greeted my arrival with exaggerated shrugs.

"Really, Allen?" said the red-haired knight.

"He's always been this way," added my fellow disciple. "There's no fixing him."

"Listen, you two—" I began.

"Oh, I understand," Richard interrupted. "I won't breathe a word to Lydia or the other girls. Probably. Perhaps."

"And I won't tell Caren," said Sui. "But sometimes I get to talking and I just can't help myself, you know?"

"In that case," I retorted, "I'll send Lady Sasha and Momiji anonymous letters detailing your whole histories of nighttime carousing."

"My lips are sealed, Allen." Richard laughed. "But I wouldn't be so sure about Sui here."

"What?!" Sui exclaimed. "Could you have picked a worse time to stab me in the back?!"

The knights and militia laughed. They were blessed with fine leaders.

Then, the last of my birds alighted and vanished. The enemy was close at hand.

"Richard, Sui."

"You don't have to tell me twice," said the vice commander. "Knights of the guard!"

“We are the sword that defends the kingdom! We are the shield that defends the kingdom! We are knights who aid the weak!” a chorus of voices roared back as the knights set about preparing for battle.

“Listen up!” Sui barked. “Whatever happens, we hold the line!”

“You bet we will!” came the response as the militia went to their stations with looks of grim resolve on their faces.

Richard and Sui moved to the front line as well. In their place, Bertrand arrived with a brief report: “Mr. Allen, sir. The message is sent. Everyone was delighted.”

I inclined my head slightly. “Thank you. I’ll make it up to you in purgatory.”

“No need. After all, we are knights.”

The tramp of a massive army reached my ears as I stepped forward alongside the veteran.

We aren’t done yet. We need to hold our ground until the last gondola leaves.

The standards of the force that filled the roadway came as a surprise.

“The main host of the Ducal House of Algren picked quite a time to make their appearance,” I said, partly in exasperation. “And unless I misread that banner, their supreme commander is with them. Richard, what have you done?”

“Not me, Allen,” the vice commander replied. “Perhaps they’ve come for you?”

“I can’t recall doing anything to get on Lord Algren’s bad side. The only people who might have a knife in the dark with my name on it are the professor, Lord Rodde, and my former university underclassmen. Actually, that’s rather a long list, now that I think about it.”

“Most people would panic if the professor and the headmaster had it in for them. And I hear your old schoolmates are nothing to sneeze at either.”

I shrugged and surveyed the battle line ahead of us. Leading the vanguard was a well-built man wearing a deep-violet uniform and cloak. His hair was a light blond except for his forelock, which was pale violet. He gripped a jet-black halberd, and a magnificently chased longsword hung at his hip. This was Grant Algren, supreme commander of the rebel army.

Veins stood out on his forehead as he bellowed, “Wily Leinster and crafty mock beast! Curse you and your dubious magics! Have you no shame?!”

“‘Dubious magics’?” Richard and I repeated, exchanging bemused looks.

Beside us, Sui angrily muttered, “Who is he calling a ‘mock beast’? Allen? Well, he’s got another thing coming.”

Our attitudes must have further incensed Grant, because he struck the butt of his halberd on the ground. The tremendous mana it contained marked it as a masterpiece crafted at around the time of the War of the Dark Lord.

“I refer to your earlier assault on our armies!” its wielder boomed. “My brother Gregory traced the spell to you!”

“Oh, is that all?” Richard responded, his words edged with icy indignation. “I don’t see that a rebel who indiscriminately attacked noncombatants has any right to complain. You don’t belong on a battlefield if a long-distance anti-army spell is enough to surprise you. Too much peace has gone to your head, Grant Algren. Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised that the scion of a ducal house who invited foreign troops into the kingdom is an incurable fool.”

“What?! How...How dare you! How *dare* you!”

Apparently, the bombardment I had sacrificed the saplings to launch had proved fairly effective. As far as my birds had been able to see, the attack had claimed no lives but caused many casualties.

Grant brandished his halberd in preparation to strike. “I, Duke Grant Algren, shall kill you personally.” The veins on his forehead grew more pronounced in response to his mounting fury. To the knights behind him, he barked, “Let no one interfere!”

“*Duke* Algren?” Richard and I repeated, taken aback. Then, we looked at each other and smirked.

“Enough,” Grant said, his rage reaching new heights. “Die!”

A quick sweep of his halberd unleashed the advanced spell Imperial Lightning Dance. Numerous bolts of electricity shot toward us...and then dissipated once I tapped into the spell formula. Its straightforward construction spared me any extra strain.

“What?!” Grant cried, freezing in shock.

“Since we’re both sons of dukes, allow me to educate you,” Richard said. “In this kingdom, a duke needs to be a skilled warrior—skilled enough to defend the nation. So, what I mean to say is”—he lunged forward—“you don’t have what it takes!”

“You dare?!” Grant just barely fended off Richard’s sword stroke with his halberd.

“Who were you calling a ‘mock beast’?!” Sui demanded, driving a spinning kick into the rebel leader’s abdomen.

Grant grunted and staggered back, but I was already there waiting for him with a blade of lightning on my staff. Two perpendicular slashes shredded his cloak. He himself evaded the blow and regained his footing, although his face was ashen.

“Hm...” I cupped my chin in my hand and considered.

Grant could cast advanced spells, but his encryption was unremarkable. I doubted that he had ever tweaked his own spell formulae. He was so careless that he had allowed Richard to close the distance between them effortlessly, and he had been unprepared for Sui’s blow. The man hadn’t even dispelled my lightning blade.

“You’re awfully weak,” I pronounced. “Wouldn’t you agree, Richard?”

“Positively feeble,” said the red-haired knight. “Not nearly up to the standard of a ducal house. What do you think, Sui?”

“He doesn’t hold a candle to that old sorcerer,” Sui agreed.

“What?!” Grant was dumbfounded. Then, he flushed crimson as he yelled, “I...I’ll make you eat those words!”

I pointed to his jet-black weapon. “I take it that’s Deep Violet, the enchanted halberd wielded by generations of Algren dukes, but...it doesn’t seem to recognize you as its owner.”

“I’m sure he just snatched it from his old man’s hands,” Richard agreed.

“Oh, so he’s not even a real duke?” Sui chimed in.

Grant fumed, quivering with humiliation. Even the rows of knights behind him seemed at a loss. He was wide open.

We sprinted forward, giving no quarter. The self-styled duke fumbled to draw his longsword in wide-eyed surprise, but he was too slow to intercept.

I shouted, “It’s high time...!”

“You left the stage!” Richard concluded.

“And Allen’s no ‘mock beast’!” Sui roared.

We struck at Grant from three sides, and he was utterly incapable of defending himself. We had won.

"I won't allow it."

To our shock, a harsh metallic clang filled the air as a single-bladed spear handily parried my staff, Richard's sword, and Sui's kick. With a grunt of exertion, we were all flung back. And then...*he* appeared on the battlefield.

*

"Your Highness is the supreme commander of our armies. Pay no heed to these common soldiers and withdraw. I shall undertake this battle," the gray-haired and bearded old knight declared. This was Grand Knight Haig Hayden, one of the Algrens' renowned "Wings," and his tone brooked no argument.

The enemy general tightened his grip on Deep Violet, which remained silent as ever, and glared hatred at us. But he retreated nevertheless, hollering, "Very well, but see to it that they perish! Your duke commands it! And the rest of you, stop dawdling and take the fight to the foe!"

"Consider it done," was the old knight's subdued reply.

I would have liked to pursue Grant. By defeating him, we could potentially influence this whole war. Besides which, it was imperative that we halt the enemy advance. Yet I could neither move a step nor take my eyes off the grizzled knight. This man was far, far stronger than his foolish lord.

Haig Hayden narrowed his eyes. "Young sorcerer and Lord Leinster. You have overcome many ferocious battles to make it here. I commend you—truly, I do. But it ends here! Now that I have taken the field, resign yourselves!"

Awe overwhelmed all three of us as wind magic erupted from the old knight's body, kicking up a dust storm. So, this was one of our kingdom's few grand knights.

"Tell me," I said, touching the scarlet and azure ribbons on my staff, "after you defeat us, do you propose to turn your spear on helpless elders, women, and children?"

"If they resist, then I must. Events are already in motion. Thus, I...I need merely discharge my duty as an Algren vassal!" He barked the last words as though he were spitting up blood.

An "Algren vassal," is he?

By all accounts, old Duke Guido Algren cared deeply for his subjects. Rumor had it that he had even made frequent visits to the beastfolk quarter incognito. I had never expected to hear such words from his trusted retainer, Haig Hayden. Something seemed off, but I couldn't spare the brainpower to ponder it further.

I shot a look at Richard and Sui. The rest of the royal guard and militia had begun to engage the enemy—we would need to stop this grizzled knight ourselves.

I raised my staff. "In that case, I suppose our only recourse is to defeat you!"

Before the words were fully out of my mouth, I fired Divine Light Shots diagonally from above and behind Hayden. Richard brought his sword down in an angled slash, launching a fusillade of at least a dozen Divine Fire Spears in a frontal assault. We broke into a sprint as we cast, racing to render the spear's long reach irrelevant.

With a tremendous shout, Hayden brought his weapon around in a great, one-handed sweep, and the flaming spears blinked out of existence. The old knight didn't even glance at my shots, which disintegrated before his tough armor of wind. Our spells hadn't so much as slowed him down.

All right, then. I'll tap into his defenses and— I've never seen this encryption before!

"A futile effort!" Hayden roared. "I received Zaur's report! Your interference slows to a crawl as long as I keep changing my formulae!"

Richard unleashed four consecutive slashes. But although the old knight's spear should have been unwieldy at close quarters, he perfectly parried every stroke. And although Sui dished out a barrage of magically imbued punches and kicks in the meantime, none could breach Hayden's defensive spells.

"This sure takes the wind out of my sails!" Richard griped, while Sui shouted, "How thick can his barrier *be*?!"

I wreathed my staff in flames and tried a quick thrust I'd learned from Lydia herself, but Hayden seized it in his free left hand without looking or leaving my friends an opening.

"What?!" I exclaimed.

"A variant on Leinster swordplay?" remarked the old knight. "You did well to mercilessly target the most vulnerable gaps in my armor. However..."

He launched blades of wind from his whole body, driving us back. Richard and I defended ourselves in time to get off with only light wounds. But what about Sui? He was badly hurt!

“Facing a grand knight is worse than I imagined.” I laughed mirthlessly as I showered my old friend with the best healing spells I could muster on the spur of the moment. “Richard, I don’t suppose you have any tricks up your sleeve?”

“Unfortunately not,” Richard replied, wearing a drawn smile.

Haig Hayden had weathered our joint assault without retreating a step. He merely watched us, spear clasped in one hand. Had he continued his offensive, Sui would be dead.

My junior fellow disciple staggered to his feet.

“Sui,” I said.

“I’m not going anywhere. I know the drill,” he growled. “Anyone can see we’re out of our league. But you know what, Allen? I’ve still got my pride!”

Sui was bleeding from head to toe, but his fighting spirit hadn’t been diminished in the slightest. What was I to do with him?

Run-of-the-mill offensive magic wouldn’t work on Hayden, and I couldn’t tamper with his spells. Even in melee combat, his skill was a force to be reckoned with. Meanwhile, I was nearly out of mana, Sui was in tatters, and Richard was exhausted. Conclusion: we had no choice but to push ourselves above and beyond for the umpteenth time that day.

I signaled to Richard with a glance. The red-haired knight winked, gripped his sword in both hands, and angled its point behind him—one of Lydia’s favorite stances.

“Single, decisive strikes are the essence of Leinster swordplay,” he said. “I wouldn’t mind testing my skills against a grand knight.”

“And I won’t hold back either!” Sui slid one foot forward and focused all his mana into his right fist, preparing for the pinpoint blow that had been our master’s specialty.

I dusted myself off and stood up. “Thank you for your patience,” I said to the old knight, who stood calmly where we had left him, “but we won’t give you a handicap!”

“Naturally. I shall crush your best head-on!”

His roar split the air. The man was the very image of a grand knight fighting for his country. Why would someone of his caliber engage in this folly?

I breathed in, then charged my legs with wind and lightning magic and sprinted forward, instantly closing the gap between us. Shrouding my staff in fire, wind, and lightning to lend it speed, I unleashed the swiftest strike in my repertoire—a series of eight blinding thrusts learned from Lydia.

Yet Hayden was even better. “Oh? Impressive! But not good enough!” he shouted, handily intercepting my attack with eight thrusts of his own—just as I’d anticipated.

I silently cast a spell.

“That won’t save you!” the grizzled knight roared as I narrowly blocked a downward swing of his spear. “Zaur warned me about the way you manipulate formulae! Your tricks won’t work on— What?!”

“We’ll see about that!” I cried as a sudden change came over the wind spell surrounding Hayden. The old knight’s defenses clung to his body, literally freezing him in place. If I couldn’t seal his spells, then forcing them into another element was the next best thing. He would break free of these restraints in next to no time, but that was long enough for us.

“Sui!” I called, knocking the grand knight’s spear aside.

“On it!” my old friend replied. He stepped forward, driving his fist home with all his might. “Chew on *this*!”

But Hayden was not to be taken lightly. He abandoned his barrier completely, shattered the ice using strength-enhancement alone, and blocked Sui’s mightiest blow with his left hand. The old knight grunted in pain as cracks ran through his gauntlet and blood spurted from them. But to our shock, his mana surged to life, producing a shock wave that flung us back—and an opening that Richard didn’t pass up.

“You face Richard Leinster!” bellowed the future duke as he darted forward in a scarlet flash.

For the first time, Hayden gripped his polearm in both hands. I could glimpse only a few fiery plumes and a slight breeze as darting sword struck spear. Both men groaned with exertion—they were evenly matched.

If I join in on Richard’s side now, then—

Without warning, Gregory Algren and two gray-robed figures appeared behind the old knight. Their hands clutched talismans.

A teleportation spell?!

“Lord Gregory?!” Hayden exclaimed, evidently as surprised as we were.

One of the robed figures, a man, targeted all four of us with a horizontal sweep of his staff.

"Take care you don't hit Mr. Allen, Lev," Gregory commanded, smiling all the while.

"Yes, sir."

An instant later, countless sharp, black chains materialized behind us.

Four advanced darkness spells in a row?!

The chains were aimed at...Richard! Were they trying to kill Hayden along with him?! Between unfamiliar encryption and my depleted mana, I would never be able to dismantle the formulae in time.

The grand knight immediately retreated. Richard, though taken completely off his guard, still managed to cast multiple Divine Fire Waves, knocking the first onslaught of chains off course. I scraped together enough mana to conjure Divine Ice Spikes to strike another group from below. That left two more to intercept.

I made to cast more spikes...but instead slumped forward, coughing.

"Allen?!"

Sui's scream rang in my ears as I clapped a hand to my mouth. It came away bloody. After all I had put my body through, it had finally had enough. I dropped to one knee in spite of myself.

Why now, of all times?

Even so, Richard swung his sword, fending off first one spell and then the next. Then, the other gray-robed figure, a diminutive woman, conjured two more waves of spiked chains from behind him. Her casting speed was incredible!

Still, the red-haired knight brought up his sword to intercept. He stood steadfast and defiant. The first wave, he blocked perfectly. Then...

"Richard!" I cried as a spell finally found its mark, shattering his white armor and filling the air with his blood. Richard roared in pain as the chain bit into his side. Yet he still dropped to one knee and darted his sword forward, pushing his mana to its limit to shut out any further attacks with a fivefold wall of hellfire.

I could see a revolting grin on Gregory's face and a humiliated grimace on Hayden's.

Richard stuck his sword in the ground and collapsed. I hobbled to his side, leaning on my staff. The royal guard raced over as well.

They kept up a steady stream of healing spells, even as the color drained from their faces...but his wound was too deep, and that barrier had drained the last of his mana.

"I got careless," the vice commander said weakly, forcing a grin. "What a time to let someone get the drop on me. I guess I'm still wet behind the ears."

"Please don't speak," I said. "Leave the rest to—"

"Don't count me out yet, Allen. I can still fight. And I doubt you're in much better shape than I am." Richard's eyes bored into me.

So, he knew just what was on my mind.

"Of course," I replied, with a nod and a shrug. "Did you think I'd let you pull out this late in the game?"

"Thanks. That means a lot to me." The bloodstained nobleman smiled and closed his eyes.

I stood up and looked ahead. The fivefold fire barrier would buy us some time, but its destruction was inevitable. I steeled my resolve.

Forgive me, mom and dad. I've been a poor excuse for a son. Caren, please don't be angry.

Forgive me, Tina, Ellie, Lynne. I wanted to see what you would achieve.

Stella, Felicia. Look after all the others for me. Please, don't cry.

And...I'm sorry, Lydia. Truly, truly sorry.

I let out my breath and wiped the blood from my lips. Then, I shot a glance at Bertrand, who hadn't relaxed his guard for a moment. The battle-hardened knight responded with the slightest of nods. This wasn't pleasant for either of us.

"Dag," I called. The old otter was overseeing operations at the dock. Most of the gondolas had already departed, but any knights of the guard too low on mana to continue fighting were boarding the last group.

"Nearly done!" he hollered. "Only you lot and the healthy old-timers left now, so get a move on!"

"I appreciate the offer. However..." I fondly recalled how I had first met this gruff yet kindhearted old otter in the Great Tree library when I was a child. Many a day he had dandled me on his knee, reminiscing about old times while we rode his gondola along sunlit canals. He was yet another person who loved me. I smiled. "You needn't reserve any boats for the guard and me. Someone needs to stay behind and hold the rebels at bay."

The passengers on board the gondolas looked stunned, as did the former chieftains and other elders waiting at the dock. Sui, his clothes soaked in blood from the desperate combat, shouted my name.

"Mud-for-brains!" Dag bellowed. "You...You expect me to go along with that codswallop?! You expect me—*me*, of all people—to stand back and watch you die?!"

"Yes, leave me to my fate," I said. "That's our best option. We'll all die if you don't. This is my first and last selfish request to you, so please, do what I ask...Grandpa Dag."

"Allen!" he called, his voice faltering.

"Thank you so much for everything. Now, please hurry; we're short on time." I bowed deeply, then turned back to face the enemy. One of the barrier's five layers had already given way.

Now, to business.

Richard was still sitting on the ground and undergoing treatment. Blood loss had drained the color from his face, his eyes were shut, and his breathing was ragged.

I nonchalantly sidled up to the most senior knight present and whispered, "Bertrand."

"All is ready," he responded without hesitation. The other experienced knights around us nodded too.

I returned the gesture and closed my eyes. Then, lamenting that saving everyone like Shooting Star had proved beyond me after all, I approached Richard.

The vice commander opened his eyes and staggered to his feet. "I suppose it's time to start getting ready?" he asked.

"It looks that way," I replied. "Richard."

"Yes? Oh, if you're hoping to lead the charge, sorry, but that's *my* job," he said haltingly. "I'm...I'm Vice Commander Richard Leinster of the royal guard. I can't disgrace myself in front of the enemy. As they say in my house, 'When in doubt, make the harder choice.' Hell of a motto, don't you think? Hm? You know, you're looking awfully ragged yourself."

Even with his injuries, my older friend never stopped cracking jokes. I absolutely, positively needed to ensure his survival.

"You're right," I replied. "Well then..."

"Allen?" Richard asked, puzzled by my sudden pause.

I laid a hand on his bloodstained armor, then touched the hilt of his sword, which was still lodged in the ground. “I’ll have you make the harder choice: defending the Great Tree with your life.”

“A-Allen?!”

With a wind spell, I flung Richard into the waiting gondola below. The knights on board scrambled to catch him.

“Unless I’ve already told you otherwise, prepare to retreat!” Bertrand bellowed. “On the double! We’re short on time!”

“Yes, sir!” The longest-serving knights beat their breastplates, then laughed loudly as they began to form a battle line.

The rest of the guard and the militia, on the other hand, were speechless. This was all news to them. A moment later, they all pressed angrily toward Bertrand and me.

“Allen!” Richard screamed from the gondola. His face was a ruddy mask of rage, and the other knights on board were holding him down. “What do you think you’re trying to pull?! I...I can still fight!”

“Not with those wounds,” I replied, with a nonchalant wave of my hand. “It’s time to retreat. And the same goes for the rest of you. What will Richard do if you all die here? Sui! This is an order from your senior fellow disciple: leave!”

“Allen!” Sui cried. “That’s...That’s not playing fair!”

“I started training with our master before you did, so I have a duty to look out for you. Not that I was able to do much.”

“No! Don’t say that!” he shouted. “I’ve...I’ve always followed in your footsteps!”

The second and third walls of fire vanished at once. We were out of time.

“Hurry!” Bertrand barked. “We don’t have time to waste!”

“Sui!” I called.

After a tense pause, the younger knights of the guard responded, “Yes, sir!” Meanwhile, Sui shouted, “Damn it! Damn it! Damn it all!” then, “Hurry! We’re getting out of here!” They all gritted their teeth as they marched down to the dock and climbed aboard gondolas.

I followed them with my gaze and saw that the vice commander was still struggling as the boats pulled away from shore. Our eyes met.

Richard, you said that you were in my debt. But...I’m in yours too. I have no family name, and I don’t even know if I’m human or beastfolk, but you called me your friend. I can’t tell you how...how happy that *made me. And that's why...*

"I can't let you die here," I said. "The future of this kingdom rests on your shoulders. Your Highness, Lord Richard Leinster, please become a worthy duke."

Richard stopped moving, stunned. "Allen?" he asked. "What...What are you saying?"

I decided to tell him my last wish—a dream that I'd shared only once before, with a dear friend who was no longer among the living.

Zel, it doesn't look like I'll be able to make it come true on my own. So...

"And someday...please change this kingdom. Please, *please* make it a place where no child will be scorned and driven to tears for being beastfolk, or an immigrant, or houseless, or an orphan. I know I can count on you. Tell Lydia and Lynne that I'm sorry, and look out for Caren. Oh, and I'll be borrowing your sword."

"Allen!" Richard screamed, louder than ever. "Let go of me! Let go! I'm not the one you should be saving! I'm not! Let go of meee!" He flailed wildly, but his knights pinned him down again, weeping all the while.

As his gondola vanished into the underground waterways, I said my last goodbyes to Dag and Sui.

"Dag, please take care of my parents. Sui, please don't cry. And treat Momiji right."

After a moment, the old otter nodded. "All right. I understand. Leave...Leave everything to me."

"You idiot," Sui sobbed aboard the gondola. "You big, stupid jackass!"

I turned my back on the dock and raised my staff. It was only a matter of time until the remaining walls of fire fell.

"Bertrand, everyone, my most sincere apologies," I said, bowing deeply to the remaining knights, who were already in the midst of their final preparations before combat. "I'm sorry for getting you mixed up in this."

"Think nothing of it!" The battle-hardened veteran thumped his breastplate. "None of us are the knights we ought to be, anyway. Fighting alongside a valiant fellow like you in our last battle is the greatest honor we could hope for! You gave us the chance to save women and children, and for that, we thank you. Salute!"

The knights did so with magnificent form. I responded in kind.

"Oh, and one last thing," Bertrand said. "Ryan, Celerian."

"Yes, sir!" The pair came forward and bent the knee before me.

"Bertrand, please let them escape," I protested, confused. "They're too young to die."

"Mr. Allen, you're the youngest of us all," he reminded me. "They absolutely insist on staying. I humbly request that you take one last try at talking sense into them, Supreme Commander, sir."

I accepted the challenge and turned back to the two knights, whose faces were set in looks of grim resolve. "Ryan, Celerian," I said, "are you afraid?"

"N-No, sir!" they replied in unison.

"Then you've no right to be here." I thrust Richard's sword into the ground and showed them my left hand. To their surprise, it was trembling. "We're all terrified—Bertrand and myself included. We have no intention of giving up, but this battle is unwinnable. Serving in the rear guard here means almost certain death. I don't have the Lady of the Sword at my side, and we can't expect a miracle."

"Then we'll join you!" they cried.

"I'm sorry, but this engagement is by reservation only, and it's already a full house. Please become fine knights who feel fear yet still laugh it off—knights committed to defending the people and those they hold dear. I have no doubt that the two of you can do it."

A brief silence followed. Then, as one, they said, "Yes, sir! We will!"

The barrier shook. Only one wall remained. Bertrand and the other old hands of the royal guard began to take up their positions.

Suddenly, my eye lit upon the scarlet and azure ribbons on my staff.

Oh, I almost forgot. I need to return these. I untied them, imbuing them with spell formulae as they passed through my hands. *Please, protect them both.*

I handed one ribbon each to the two young knights, who were wiping tears from their eyes.

"Mr. Allen?" Ryan asked.

"What is this?" added Celerian.

"I have a difficult request for you both," I said. "Please return these ribbons to Their Highnesses, Lady Lydia Leinster and Lady Tina Howard. And..." I entrusted the knights with a message for the albatross around my neck—crybaby that she was—and for my adorable, hardworking pupil. "That's all. The rest is in your hands."

The pair nodded repeatedly through their flood of tears.

"Yes...Yes, sir! I, Ryan Bor—"

"And I, Celerian Ceynoth, swear to...to...!"

A hot wind blew over me as the final wall began to disintegrate. I drew Richard's sword from the earth and said, "Now, you should be on your way. Dag!"

"Got it!" he hollered. "Count on me!"

I didn't look back at the old otter, who was rowing the last gondola, as I began walking toward the battlefield. The two knights raced down the steps behind me. And then, I heard a larger group ascend. I turned.

"But why?" I gasped, stunned.

There stood the former chieftains and the other elders who were to leave on the last gondola. Every one of them carried a timeworn spear, sword, or staff. Weeping, the old folks crowded around me.

"You fool! You utter nincompoop! You and those knights saved our wives and kids. Isn't...Isn't being shields the least we can do to balance the scales?"

"If we must die, the oldest should go first. I'm sorry—so sorry—for the way we've treated you!"

"We've always heard and told of how deeply we mourn the loss of Shooting Star at Blood River. Yet we almost let history repeat itself—let a new Shooting Star risk his life before the Great Tree, of all places."

"We know that our blood can't wash away the wrongs we've done you, but...but though we lost our way, we're still beastfolk! Letting a child die to save our old bones is one thing we could never, ever do."

The former chieftain of the fox clan tearfully took my hand and said, "Now, at the very end, we've finally, finally remembered what really matters...though I'm sure our ancestors will still have harsh words for us. Allen! You...You are our child and our family!"

Tears rolled unbidden down my cheeks.

I don't believe in any gods—and even if I did, they wouldn't save me—but...Lydia, miracles might be real after all.

I dried my eyes, readied my staff and sword, and stood up straight. "Thank you," I said. "In that case, please join me!"

The elders let out a roar of assent as the last flames went out.

An apoplectic Grant Algren brought up the rear of the enemy line arrayed before us. Grand Knight Haig Hayden looked grim. Old Earl Zani stood beside him. There were also the two gray-robed enigmas who had struck at Richard, and the Knights of the Holy Spirit. Behind their ranks, the third Algren brother, Gregory, feigned a look of sorrow.

A lone sorcerer emerged from the enemy line. He was tall and handsome, and his hair, a little on the long side, was light blond with a single pale-violet lock over his forehead. His hands gripped a halberd, and he wore a dagger at his hip. He looked on the verge of tears. This was my former university underclassman and the old duke's fourth son—Gil Algren.

"Lord Gil! You mustn't!" came a dreadful shout from behind the lines. Gil's bodyguard and maid in menswear, Konoha, was calling out to him, her black hair in disarray, as knights of the Holy Spirit held her down. "Anything...Anything but that! Abandon my sister and me!"

"Her sister?" I murmured, looking toward the source of the screams. I saw another black-haired woman, limp in the grip of knights of the Holy Spirit, with a collar of chains around her neck.

They have Momiji?! A moment later, it all fell into place. *Oh, I see. So...So, that's how it is.*

My mind hadn't been playing tricks on me when I saw Konoha in Momiji. In which case, the black-haired sisters whom Gil had once emancipated with his "empty gesture" in the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit must have been... What a strange and convoluted world we lived in.

My old schoolmate stopped a short distance from me, still looking miserable.

"Hello there, Gil," I called to him. "I'm amazed you didn't visit me in the hospital. You used to be more considerate."

Gil ignored my raillery. "Why? Why?! Why are you here?!" he sobbed, tightening his grip on his halberd. "I...I know you could have managed on your own! So...So, why put yourself through all this?"

"Don't cry like that, Gil." I twirled my staff and raised my bloodstained blade. "You're doing the right thing. You saved their lives once; you shouldn't let them down the second time just because it's hard on you. So don't cry, Gil Algren. Hold your head high, have faith in your convictions, wipe your tears, and stand proud before me. Allow me to introduce myself." I stood up straight, my spirits soaring as I said, "I am Allen of the wolf clan! My parents named me for the legendary Shooting Star of the beastfolk. I am the partner of Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, and the private tutor to Tina Howard, Stella Howard, Ellie Walker, and Lynne Leinster. For the honor of my parents, who gave me a name when I had none; my dear sister; and the Lady of the Sword, who surpasses all others in dignity, strength, and beauty, and for the sake of a kind friend, I request a few moments of your time. I swear on all that I am that you will go no farther!"

"Kill them all!" Grant shrieked, signaling the attack.

Bertrand, the knights of the guard, and the old beastfolk soldiers began weaving spells.

Amid the tumult, Gil slowly raised his head, shifted his halberd to his right hand, and drew his dagger with his left. Light spilled from the weapon, forming into a myriad of shining octagonal barriers. It was the same knife that Gerard had once carried—the one imbued with the remnants of the great spell Radiant Shield!

“At least...” my friend said. “At the very least, I, Gil Algren, will be the one to defeat you! Brain of the Lady of the Sword, witness the essence of my house’s martial skill and sorcery!”

“I’m ready for it!” I shouted, conjuring a blade of flame on the tip of my staff. Then, I broke into a run. As Bertrand and the veterans launched their final charge, my staff crashed into Gil Algren’s halberd.

*

“...I don’t know what happened after that. We left orb communication range and could no longer maintain magical creatures. None of the evacuees suffered further attacks, and Vice Commander Richard retreated to the Great Tree safely. Then, Celerian and I took Skyhawk Company griffins that were taking shelter there and immediately escaped the eastern capital at the first chance we got.”

A gloomy silence pervaded the hall as Ryan’s long tale came to an end. Some sobbed heavily. Even I hugged Maya, burying my face in her uniform as I cried, “Dear brother, dear brother... Maya, my...my dear brother is...”

“My lady.” The former maid tenderly rubbed my back, but my tears...my tears just kept flowing.

My dear mother looked heavenward. “What a foolish boy,” she murmured. “Truly, truly foolish. He took absolutely everything on his own shoulders—the fate of the beastfolk, the royal guard, and even Richard’s life. How can I ever show my face to Ellyn?”

“Sir Ryan, did any of those who remained behind return to the Great Tree?” Anna asked quietly, her head lowered.

The young knight slowly shook his head. “None of the rear guard returned. And because the enemy strengthened their jamming spells and took stricter precautions against magical creatures, we know no more of them.”

“Tell me his message,” said my dear sister. Her voice was quiet, almost inaudible, but it carried through the hall.

I raised my head to look at her, although I kept my hold on Maya. Her face was white as snow and devoid of feeling.

With an obvious effort, Ryan repeated, “‘Sorry, Lydia. It looks like I won’t be able to celebrate your birthday. But I’ll get back soon, and when I do, let's throw a party at my house to commemorate Lady Lydia Leinster being a year older than me again.'"

My dear sister sat dazed, her silence betraying no hint of emotion.

"Dear brother!" I wailed, burying my face in Maya's uniform again as my heart raged out of control. "Dear brother...you liar!"

"Anna," my dear sister said, breathing the deepest of sighs, "bring me a knife."

"My lady, you mustn't," the head maid answered hesitantly. "Mr. Allen would never lie to you."

"Oh, I know. Don't worry—I don't plan on dying this instant." She spoke with detached, dispassionate calm.

I looked up again, just in time to see my dear sister's long, gorgeous scarlet hair unceremoniously lopped off.

My dear mother, Anna, and I all cried her name as a confused din filled the hall.

Scarlet locks fluttered to the floor as my dear sister slowly raised her head to look at our parents. “Mother. Father,” she said. “Enough. I’ve waited long enough. If the Leinsters won’t act, I’ll suit myself. I assume you don’t object?”

“Lydia,” our dear mother replied slowly, “tell me: what do you plan to do?”

“You need to ask?” Plumes of flame whirled through the room, radiating a wrath that had gone beyond mere anger...and unfathomable depths of sorrow. “I’ll go to the royal capital and incinerate it, then I’ll go to the eastern capital and slice it to bits.”

“And then?”

My dear sister smiled sadly. “If he’s alive, I’ll be furious with him—really furious. If he’s dead...then my life ends there too. I can’t go on walking in a dark world without my star.” She paused, then repeated, “I can’t.”

Our parents, Anna, Maya, Romy, Lily, and I let out a horrified chorus of “Lydia!” “Lady Lydia!” and “Dear sister!” Everyone else in the hall gasped.

Then, reluctantly, Ryan spoke up. “If you’ll excuse me.” All eyes focused on him. “Mr. Allen gave me one other message, to be delivered only if Lady Lydia threatened to take her own life.”

Silence. Then, ever so softly, my dear sister said, “Tell me.”

The young knight lowered his head, unsure whether to continue. But at last, he overcame his hesitation and responded, “‘If you try to follow me in death, I’ll hate you for it. I hope that you won’t make that necessary. Please, Lydia.’” After a pause, Ryan added, “And he sends this.”

My dear sister stretched out a trembling hand to take the bloodstained scarlet ribbon offered to her—the same ribbon that she had tied to her staff when she had left it with my dear brother. She clutched it to her breast and stood still, dazed. Her eyes were wide open, and tears streamed down her cheeks. Then her whole body shook as she covered her face and wailed, “Unbelievable. You utter, incorrigible fool. Why? Why?! Why do you always, always, *always* think of me, and never of yourself?!”

“Lady Lydia!”

"Dear sister!"

Maya and I flung our arms around her as she crumpled to the floor. The air rang with her sobs, and a chill fell over the hall. All eyes were shut tight.

Then, I heard voices arguing out in the corridor.

"P-Please stop!" Sida cried.

"What insolence!" a man snapped. "We represent our principalities!"

"Yes! And we have an appointment!" added another.

This was hardly the time for fussing over such trifles. Nonetheless, the doors opened without so much as a knock.

In came two men—the envoys from Atlas and Bazel. They blinked in surprise when they saw my dear sister and quailed before the icy gazes of all present. Even so, one cleared his throat and said, "Pardon our intrusion."

"Still, this assembly should make an ideal forum," added the other.

Both envoys then focused their attention on my dear father.

"Your Highness, the time we agreed upon has passed. We can only wait so long."

"Please, give us your answer. If you but grant the gradual restitution of Etna and Zana, our nations' armies shall withdraw from your borders and—"

"Anna, Romy," my dear mother called, cutting the envoy's speech short.

"Yes, mistress!" responded our head maid and her second-in-command.

"Are preparations complete?"

"Perfectly complete!" Anna replied.

"We can begin at once, should you command it!" Romy chimed in.

"I see," said my dear mother. "Liam."

"Yes, Lisa, I understand. Are we all in agreement?" my dear father asked the assembly.

One by one, the heads of each house rose and thumped their chests.

"I have no objection!"

"Small fires are best extinguished quickly!"

"Depend on me!"

"We're all with you, Liam," Uncle Lucas said, nodding. "We can't allow children to bear all the burden!"

My dear father glanced at my dear mother. She rose serenely, her scarlet tresses swaying, and boldly proclaimed, "Then, we shall sound the alarm! Go, all of you! We won't tolerate stragglers on this campaign!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Our guests raced from the council hall without a moment's delay. Even Ryan left, supported by the red-eyed Earl Bor's arm around his shoulders. Only my parents remained, along with Earl Simon Sykes; my dear sister, who clung to Maya and me as she wept profusely; and a worried-looking Lily. Anna and Romy were nowhere to be seen.

Before long, I heard a massive bell toll. Others took up the sound, spreading the clangor through the southern capital. They must have put the great belfry to use.

"As for your proposal," my dear father informed the envoys, who stood stunned by the sudden turn of events, "our answer is no. A thousand times no."

"What?! P-Preposterous!"

"Does your house wish for war with the whole league?!"

The envoys spluttered in confusion once they had gotten over their shock. My dear father, in contrast, remained calm.

"Balderdash. Perhaps you gentlemen take this situation too lightly," he said, radiating menace as he rose to his feet. His mana rattled the windowpanes.

I almost forgot. Here and now, my dear father is Duke Leinster, guardian of the south.

"We are Leinsters," he continued. "In the War of the Dark Lord, we joined with the Howards of the north and the legendary Shooting Star's beastfolk brigade to march on the demon capital Dracul and make the Dark Lord's blood run cold! Why should we fear war with the league or with the rebels? Our kingdom's ducal houses are its cornerstones—they exist to defend king, country, and, above all, the people, the weak, and the young! However mighty the army we face...we shall raze it with fire and sword!"

My dear father's roar blanched the color from the envoys' faces. They looked ready to faint.

Then, ever so quietly, but with a seething rage, he said, "This disturbance left my eldest child and a boy to whom I owe much stranded in the eastern capital. And they did their duty with distinction. As parents, we must—we *must*—aid those children in their hour of need. You seem ill-informed, so allow me to teach you one of my house's precepts." He banged the table, and it shattered under his fist. The envoys' faces had gone beyond pale and turned the color of clay. "'When family—especially a child—comes to harm, show no mercy!'"

The envoys toppled awkwardly backward onto the floor, their teeth chattering with fright.

My dear father softened his expression. "I'll also tell you what those bells mean. As you reminded me yesterday, my house doesn't maintain a very large standing army in peacetime. But now that the bells have tolled, there's no stopping them. They signal a general mobilization of all the southern houses. We will be ready to invade your territory within two days' time."

The envoys struggled to salvage their position.

"P-Please! D-Don't be hasty!"

"Y-You've nothing to gain from war with us!"

My dear father fixed them with an icy glare and majestically roared, "Don't take the Leinsters so lightly! We care nothing for your petty schemes! If you stand in our way, we'll drown all eleven principalities and the city of water in a sea of fire, then swing round to cut this insurrection down to size! Lily, throw these fools out of the house!"

"You got it!" The maid scooped up the envoys and hurled them out a window. I heard screams as they sailed out into the garden.

"Whew! All in a good day's work!" Lily crowed as she returned to my dear sister's side. At the moment, her exuberance was almost a blessing.

"Master, mistress," Anna said, appearing before my parents without a sound. "The venerable master has arrived. He reports that the venerable mistress has already taken action."

"I see," my dear father replied. "In that case, I'll leave our headquarters in my father-in-law's capable hands."

Dear grandfather is here! And even dear grandmother is on the move!

"Anna, have you anything else to report?" my dear mother asked.

"Two things, mistress," the head maid replied, holding up two fingers on her right hand. "First, I wish to temporarily endow a certain individual with all the authority vested in Mr. Allen.

Second, I humbly request your permission to place Lady Sasha Sykes under that individual's command."

My dear father knitted his brows. Meanwhile, my dear mother stood and came over to embrace my dear sister, murmuring, "Don't worry. It will be all right. I promise we'll save Allen. You have nothing to worry about."

"Allen's full authority *and* Sasha?" my dear father repeated. "I approve the transfer of power. As for Sasha... Simon, do you object?"

"I do not," Simon replied, looking up from the documents he'd been studying. "Make the most of my daughter's talent."

A moment passed. Then, my dear father asked, "Anna, what are you plotting? I assume you'll assign those two to my father-in-law's command?"

The head maid responded to this reasonable question with a smile even more sinister than usual. "I'm plotting a war, of course—one fought with gold and every other means at our disposal. To hasten our march on the royal capital and then the east, I shall see to it that the League of Principalities begs for mercy posthaste. Romy will command the maid corps's main force, with Maya as her lieutenant. Meanwhile..." Anna snapped her fingers, conjuring a map of the whole kingdom in midair.

I've seen my dear brother do that!

The royal capital flashed, then the eastern capital. Needless to say, both cities must have been crawling with rebel troops. Infiltrating them would be nearly impossible. But the Ducal House of Leinster's head maid smiled.

I've never seen Anna so angry.

I hugged Lily, who stood next to me. She hugged me tight in return.

Our head maid never stopped smiling as she announced, "I will lead a small band and dust off my old skills to scout ahead of our armies. Your humble servant won't fail to discover what's become of Young Master Richard and Mr. Allen. Please be patient a short while longer."

Chapter 4

“Our time is now!” cried the Marchese di Atlas. “If we strike now, we can retake the lost principalities of Etna and Zana!”

“It’s a fact that the kingdom is embroiled in civil strife,” the Marchese di Bazel added. “And however mighty the Leinsters may be, reason dictates that they’ll avoid fighting a war on two fronts. We need only apply more pressure to extract concessions from them with ease!”

Both marchesi had risen from their chairs and were expostulating with such intensity that I could glimpse the gold chains around their necks.

This was the city of water, heart of the League of Principalities, and I, Roa Rondoiro, stood in a secret chamber in the innermost recesses of its great assembly hall—a sacred place reserved for debating matters of national importance. The five marchesi of the north, six marchesi of the south, and a doge and deputy chosen from the city council comprised the league’s supreme decision-making body, the Committee of Thirteen. It had been in session for three days already, and the debate still raged even as Windday wore on.

The question at hand was whether to hold firm in our demand that the Ducal House of Leinster restore the former principalities. But opinions were fiercely divided, and a consensus remained elusive.

“The youngsters love to hear themselves talk,” the plump, gray-headed, goggle-eyed old woman seated in front of me muttered ostentatiously. She was my grandmother, Marchesa Regina Rondoiro, the ruler of the wealthiest of the southern principalities, and I was here as her bodyguard. “Don’t you agree, Roa?”

“Grandmother, please, not so loud,” I replied.

“Humph! I wasn’t trying to be subtle,” she snapped, her voice filling the chamber. “And now my hip’s started acting up. Oh, how it aches.”

The Marchesi di Atlas and Bazel looked furious, and the former lords of Etna and Zana, who sat beside them, glared at us as well. The bodyguards standing behind the marchesi gripped their weapons threateningly.

But they made no impression on my grandmother, who merely sipped her tea and pronounced it "not bad." Unable to endure the attention, I toyed with a lock of my palest orange bangs and allowed my gaze to wander.

I couldn't help noticing the clear age gap in this chamber. All five northern marchesi were young. Not as young as I was—eighteen—but still no older than their early twenties. Meanwhile, all but two of the southern marchesi were positively elderly. One young southern marchese—Carlyle Carnien, with whom I was acquainted—was deep in conversation with the other, the Marchese di Folonto, who sat beside him.

"Marchesa Rondoiro, if you have an opinion, state it," said the old man in the seat of honor, whose pale-aqua hair was streaked with gray—Doge Pirro Pisani.

"Humph! If you insist," my grandmother responded. "You want to prod the Leinsters more than you already have? Poppycock! That's a losing proposition if I've ever heard one."

"You dare?!" shouted the Marchese di Atlas.

"I won't stand for that, even from you," said the Marchese di Bazel, softer spoken but no less furious.

The other three northern marchesi turned disapproving glares on us as well.

"Listen closely, youngsters," my grandmother continued, taking the same tone she used when educating young people in her own domain. "That house is anything but reasonable."

The northern marchesi took a moment to reply.

"We realize that."

"That's why we've already hired a large force of mercenaries—more than one hundred thousand in all!"

The eleventh-hour revelation sent a stir through the chamber. How could they have already begun recruiting for their hard-line approach? Simply engaging mercenaries cost money, and the marchesi would have to recoup those losses. Atlas and Bazel had already decided on war.

My grandmother narrowed her eyes, and veins stood out on her temples.

Oh no.

"More than one hundred thousand," the Marchese di Carnien repeated, applauding. "The Leinsters are justly feared for their magic and their swordplay, but that numerical advantage should give us the upper hand in negotiations. Don't you agree, Marchese Folonto?"

"I agree that there is strength in numbers. War would be one thing, but I see nothing wrong with forceful negotiating tactics. The Leinsters might very well agree to a gradual restitution."

The mood in the chamber was beginning to take a strange turn. The six southern marchesi had historically opposed war, and they had only grudgingly consented to conducting maneuvers along the border. I glared at Carlyle. What did he think he was doing?

"Does anyone else have something to add?" asked Doge Pisani. "If not, I suggest we put this matter to—"

A quiet knock drew all eyes to the door.

"Enter," said the doge.

"I beg your pardon." A nervous-looking secretary approached the doge and his deputy. Whatever he said left the two seasoned politicians speechless.

"Bad news, by the look of it," my grandmother interjected.

"Indeed." Doge Pisani slowly surveyed the chamber, then gravely announced, "This very day, the Ducal House of Leinster declared war on the Principalities of Atlas and Bazel. My lords and ladies, it appears that events have begun to move more swiftly than we imagined."

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"Good grief. What is the world coming to?" my grandmother griped, leaning on her staff as she walked the nighttime streets. "Have you taken measures, Roa?"

The Leinsters' unexpected declaration of war had thrown the Committee of Thirteen into chaos. Ultimately, the marchesi had dispersed, resolving to make gathering intelligence their first priority and to reconvene in the morning. And so, my grandmother and I found ourselves walking from the assembly hall to our hotel—carriages were forbidden on the city of water's narrow, stone-paved streets.

The moon shone eerily red that night, and even the magical streetlamps seemed tinged with blood. We were accompanied only by four guards, all experienced fighters.

"Yes," I replied, "I've already dispatched agents to the Duchy of Leinster. But...could it really be true? A single duke inviting war with the league seems like madness to me."

"Ignorant, green, and slow. You won't live long like that," my grandmother snapped, skewering me with her ruthless critique. She thumped her staff on the paving stones. Then, without turning around, she corrected my misconceptions. "Listen closely. Whomever else you fight, never go head-to-head with the Leinsters, Howards, or Lebuferas. Those war-starved barbarians are— How careless of me." She clicked her tongue and struck the paving stones again, conjuring powerful magical defenses.

What on earth...?

Then, I finally realized—although it wasn't yet late, we were alone on the street.

"A barrier?" I murmured. "And we didn't even notice?"

"Who's there?! Come out!" my grandmother hollered at the pitch darkness ahead.

Slowly, a tall woman stepped into view. Her shoulder-length hair was an extremely light shade of red and held in the front with a silver clip. Her skin was a little on the dark side. Was she an elf? If not, she at least had elvish blood. She was slender, although not flat chested, and she was dressed as a maid. Her hands held a large suitcase. Faced with this woman, who seemed so out of place in the city of water at night, we warily reached for our swords and daggers...until my grandmother motioned for us to stop.

"Wait. I know her from the old days," she told us. Then, bitterly, "Was this grandiose barrier called for?"

The woman pinched the edges of her skirt and dipped in an elegant curtsy. "It's been too long—since the Third Southern War, I believe. I hope I've found you in a pleasant humor."

"You haven't. What do you want? A little birdie told me you resigned as second-in-command of the Leinster maids, but I'm guessing this still has something to do with that ruckus in the north."

"It does." The woman's smile was beautiful, but it sent a chill up my spine. My body was screaming at me to stay alert.

"And they sent *you* as their errand girl?" my grandmother asked suspiciously. "Do the Leinsters take this fuss as seriously as all that?"

The enigmatic maid chuckled in the moonlight. She giggled like a little girl in the face of Regina Rondoiro "the Impaler," the most feared sorceress in the southern principalities. At last, she wiped the corners of her eyes and said, "I beg your pardon. Being but a humble maid, I am here merely as a caretaker."

"Humph!" My grandmother tightened her two-handed grip on her staff and struck the ground in irritation. "I doubt many people on this continent can treat Ceynoth the Headhunter like— Don't tell me..."

Did she say "Headhunter"? The same Headhunter whose great scythe slaughtered so many brave soldiers and sorcerers in the Second and Third Southern Wars? But she's—

Someone else walked toward us on the pitch-dark street. Every cell in my body screamed out in terror. Something was there—something that no person should ever cross. Slowly it came into view.

"Goodness gracious," it said, brightly and without a hint of tension. "You mustn't scare them like that, Celebrim."

The thing that emerged from the shadows was a woman. Her long hair was such a vivid red that it seemed blood-soaked. She was short, like a child, and looked girlish, but she wore a scarlet sorceress's robe emblazoned with the Leinster arms.

I drew my sword and immediately deployed a spell. The guards followed suit.

"Stop!" my grandmother snapped. "You wouldn't even serve as living shields."

We froze, stunned by her unsparing appraisal of our combat ability. The woman ignored us and approached the elf.

"I'm so sorry, Celebrim," she said. "That suitcase must have been awfully heavy."

"A maid does her duty, venerable mistress," the elf responded. "I'm delighted to have you all to myself."

We were ready to unleash our spells on them at any moment, but they spoke as though they hadn't a care in the world.

"What is this about?" my grandmother asked haltingly.

"What is what about?" said the woman.

"Don't play games with me! You wouldn't come here in person for any run-of-the-mill trouble! Is your house hoping for an all-out war with the league?!"

I had never seen the Marchesa di Rondoiro uneasy before.

As I watched, the woman's eyes turned a deep, deep scarlet, and her hair and robes billowed as fiery plumes filled the air. "You're not even prepared for that, yet you tried to bar our way?" she asked. "My, what daredevils you are."

A hot wind was gusting down the street. As I raised both hands to shield myself, I finally understood—my mana couldn't begin to hold a candle to hers. But even so, I gritted my teeth and shouted, "Who...Who are you?! No one can have this much mana!"

The woman looked nonplussed for a moment. Then she bowed her head deeply and said, "Oh, of course! I haven't introduced myself. How silly of me."

Slowly, she raised her head and looked me in the eye. Even that filled me with an urge to vomit.

Oh. I might die here.

"My name is Lindsey Leinster, although I believe I'm better known as the 'Bloodred Witch' in your lands." After a brief pause, she added, "Such an unflattering nickname! I wish you'd call me 'Scarlet Heaven' instead—that's what I go by in the kingdom!"

Only a supreme effort of will allowed the guards and I to stave off panic. Former Duchess Lindsey Leinster, the Bloodred Witch! The fiend who had brought about our defeat in the Second Southern War by defeating all of the Seven Wands—famed as the mightiest sorcerers in the league at that time—single-handedly and in a single strike!

With her head-hunting maid waiting attentively behind her, the witch smiled. "You see, Regina dear, I'd like to ask you a favor. Won't you hear me out?"

A long silence followed. Finally, my grandmother said, "What do you want?"

I would have liked to grab her and run away as fast as my legs would carry me. But I had an excellent strategic mind—not that it did me much good—and it told me that flight would mean instant death even if every possible coincidence miraculously played out in my favor. I couldn't move.

"I'd like the six southern principalities to stay put until we've incinerated Atlas, Bazel, and perhaps the other northern principalities and the city of water if it comes to that," the witch said brightly, her smile never wavering. "That wouldn't be so hard, would it?"

In other words, she wouldn't guarantee the safety of the southern principalities if we got involved. The witch was effectively demanding that we offer up both the northern principalities and the capital of the league. My grandmother's features twisted in anguish. She could be unscrupulous at times, but her loyalty to the league was beyond doubt. The witch had to realize that she—

Then, it hit me.

Carlyle, I always knew gambling wasn't your strong suit. You think you have a wild beast by the tail, but you really snagged a dragon—a bringer of calamity. You never stood a chance...unless you're still hiding quite an ace up your sleeve.

"Would you mind giving me your answer on the spot?" the witch pressed while I pondered. "The Leinsters never forget a debt, especially not to the one who halted the curse on my darling little granddaughter, saving her life and our hearts. That's what this is about, Regina. Be a dear and give up." There was heartfelt gratitude on her face...and an all-consuming flame of rage in the depths of her eyes.

My grandmother, on the other hand, looked shocked. "Halted the child's curse?! I-Impossible. I don't believe it."

What curse? What are they talking about?

Silence fell. A short while later, my grandmother gave her answer, although she clearly wasn't happy about it. The witch merely smiled in response. Our only observer was the blood-spattered moon.

*

"Please, my lady!" my maid for the summer begged, bowing deeply. "Please, *please* take me with you into battle! I beg of you!"

"I can't do that, Sida," I replied for the umpteenth time that morning.

It was the day after my dear father had declared war and my dear mother had sounded the call to arms. Nobles who had already marshaled their troops were flocking to our house in the southern capital with a rapidity that defied common sense. The whole thing seemed unreal, even though my own family was responsible.

I changed into a brand-new scarlet military uniform and beret. A black hair clip toward the front of my head, which doubled as a video and communication orb, completed the ensemble. I cut an imposing figure in my room's full-length mirror, if I did say so myself. My dear father had told the envoys that we would strike in two days, but at the rate things were going, we would probably march that afternoon.

Sida had yet to raise her head.

"Listen," I told her, "a Leinster doesn't take a maid in training to a battlefield. You must know that. Do you realize how hard it was to get you assigned to headquarters instead of standing by at the house?"

"But...But I'm *your* maid, Lady Lynne!" she protested. "And a maid never leaves her mistress's side! I promised the Great Moon that I wouldn't!"

She was more stubborn than I'd thought. I was just worrying about how to talk her round when the door flew open.

"Are you ready, Lady Lynne?! I know I'm raring to go!"

It was Lily, the Leinster Maid Corps's number three.

"Are you really planning to go dressed like that?" I asked pointedly.

"Absolutely! After all, I *am* a maid!"

As usual, she was dressed like a student. How could she think of going off to war like that? Then again, most of the other maids still wore their normal uniforms as well, although some buckled breastplates over them.

The older girl walked up to me, and her expression turned abruptly serious as she said, "My lady, let's go look in on Lady Lydia."

"All right." I nodded and pulled my beret lower. I felt a little reluctant to see my dear sister in her current state. She had withdrawn into her room after her lament the day before and had refused to see anyone since. I could hardly imagine her going out to fight in that condition.

"Come along, Sida," I called to the maid in training.

"What?" She goggled at me in blank amazement. Then tears welled in her eyes.

"You're to wait on me while I'm at home, remember?" I said, with an airy wave of my hand.

"O-Of course, my lady! I'm your personal maid! I swore it to the Great Moon!" Sida leapt for joy, inadvertently reminding me that bosoms could jiggle.

Then the older maid hugged me from behind. "L-Lily?" I exclaimed, but she only let out a smug laugh and said, "Don't forget, Sida: Lady Lynne is *mine*."

"Wh-What?! H-How could you, ma'am?!" cried the maid in training. "I'll tell the Great Moon on you!"

"If you don't like it, hurry up and become a full-fledged maid!" In a softer tone, Lily added, "I'll keep her safe this time, so stay at headquarters and hold the fort while we're gone."

"Y-Yes, ma'am."

You're more sensitive to people's feelings than you seem, Lily. But hurry up and let go of me already! Those lethal weapons on your chest are hitting me in the head!

I strode through the hallways with Lily and Sida in tow. The house was abuzz with maids and other servants running to and fro and talking on communication orbs. I probably wasn't imagining their occasional references to "Miss Fosse" and "Lady Sasha." I'd heard that the pair of them were supervising logistics and intelligence under Grandfather Leen's command, and they seemed to be off to a dramatic start.

In the meantime, we arrived at my dear sister's door. Yet I hesitated to open it. She hadn't been herself after hearing Ryan's report. I had broken down crying myself, overcome by the shock, but she had wailed as though the world were coming to an end. Times like this made me wish that Anna were here, but the head maid had already left the city with her small band of subordinates. We would just have to do something about this our—

Lily opened the door and hollered, "Excuse us, Lady Lydia!"

"Lily?!" I cried, while Sida babbled, at a loss for words. But the maid paid us no mind and stepped inside, so we hurried after her.

To our astonishment, the room that met our eyes was neat and tidy—cleaned and organized to perfection. And before a full-length mirror stood my idol, my dear sister, Lydia Leinster. Her back was turned to us, but although she was smartly dressed, her newly shortened hair remained rough-shorn. A black clip fastened it near her temple. She wore not her uniform as the princess's bodyguard, but a jet-black military dress which I'd heard our dear mother had once gone to war in.

"What is it, Lily, Lynne?" she asked levelly, without looking at us.

"Well..." Lily faltered.

"W-We came to call you," I ventured.

“Oh. I see.” My dear sister belted on two swords that had been leaning against a chair, then turned to face us. One of the blades was new to me, but it was obviously a masterpiece. Even through its scabbard, I could feel its overwhelming magical strength. And on her right wrist was the scarlet ribbon stained with my dear brother’s blood.

I felt a pang in my chest. Nevertheless, I forced myself to say, “Dear sister, are you feeling well? I don’t believe you’ve eaten a bite since yesterday. And, um...are you certain you shouldn’t wear your guard uniform?”

“I’m fine. I don’t want to eat. This uniform will do.”

“I see.” I wavered, unable to bring myself to ask anything more. Even Lily was at a loss for words.

My dear sister ignored us as she picked up her pocket watch, which was the only thing on her table, and ever so tenderly stroked its surface before putting it away. Then she started walking out of the room.

“Lynne, Lily,” she said, “let’s go. Isn’t that why you came to call me?”

“R-Right!” I responded, hastily taking off after her.

“Lady Lydia,” Lily called softly, concern in her voice.

But my dear sister made no response. Something about her seemed off—as though she had gone back to who she’d been before the Royal Academy. I clasped my right hand over my heart.

Dear brother, what...what ought I to do?

*

“I beg of you, let the Scarlet Order lead the charge!”

“Nonsense, Tobias. My house is owed a turn.”

“But Lords Evelyn and Hugues, you must be exhausted from your forced march. Allow my house to bear this burden.”

“All three of you forget that by ancient custom, the vanguard belongs to those whose lands are closest to the enemy. In this case, that would be my under-duchy. And this will be our flying griffin knights’ first battle. Liam, please give us your verdict!”

Four armored men gathered round my dear father, Duke Liam Leinster, who sat resting his clasped hands on his desk in the center of the council hall while the assembled commanders looked on.

Earl Tobias Evelyn, the aristocratic gentleman in bright scarlet plate, was a fearless fighter and commander of the Scarlet Order. For generations, this red-clad force, seen as the finest under my house's banner, had served in the vanguard of our major campaigns.

Marquess Thorgeir Hugues was short and bald, but his limbs bulged with muscle. He had dwarvish blood in his veins, and his house's heavy infantry was the sturdiest in the south.

Marquess Crow Pozon spoke softly but with an air of intelligence and conviction. His magical heavy assault cavalry—a unique force which he had trained himself—was renowned throughout the continent.

The red-haired and bearded gentleman who had spoken last was my dear uncle, Under-duke Lucas Leinster. He had founded an order of knights that made concerted use of griffins.

All four were commanders of great courage, ferocity, intellect, and renown—eminently qualified to lead the charge. But my dear father shook his head and said, "No. Our vanguard in this campaign is already chosen."

Neither Sida, the assembled commanders, nor I could conceal our shock. Who could possibly be more worthy of that honor than these men? But my dear sister and Lily were unfazed. They had apparently anticipated this.

Which reminds me: I don't see my dear mother or the maids. Wait. Don't tell me...

"I will lead the vanguard."

The voice was quiet, but it carried through the hall. Everyone turned to the door, and satisfied understanding soon colored their expressions.

There stood a beautiful woman wearing a military dress as scarlet as her hair with an enchanted sword at her hip—my dear mother, the former Lady of the Sword and, by reputation, the finest swordswoman on the continent, Lisa Leinster. Romy and all the other officers of the maid corps who were on hand followed behind her as she calmly strode to my dear father's side and surveyed the hall. Everyone saluted in unison.

"My wife and our maids will lead the charge," my dear father gravely proclaimed. "Evelyn, your Scarlet Order will bring up the rear."

"Yes, sir!" came a chorus of assent.

"Hugues will lead the main host."

"With pleasure!"

"Pozon, our right wing."

"Depend upon it!"

"Lucas, dominate the skies."

"The under-duchy shall show its worth in battle!"

"Our left wing will be a cavalry force picked from all our houses. Sykes, report your latest intelligence."

"Yes, sir," a slim, seemingly unremarkable man who had been conversing via a communication orb responded, rising from his seat. This was Earl Simon Sykes, the spymaster of the south. "Based on aerial reconnaissance using griffins, ground-based scouting, the latest commercial reports, and intercepted magical communications, I estimate the total combined forces of both principalities at 150 thousand strong. Our army, on the other hand, numbers thirty thousand at the most. Although we expect reinforcements, a numerical disadvantage is inevitable...but we have nothing to fear!"

Earl Sykes came forward and thrust his finger at the map spread out on a table in the center of the hall. Black glass game pieces marked the positions of multiple armies within Atlas and Bazel. I could see that they were quite a distance from the enemy forces congregating on the Avasiek Plain, which lay on the border almost directly between Etna and Zana.

"At present, our enemies' strength is dispersed," Earl Sykes declared. "Both marchesi seem to be away from the front, in the city of water. The army at Avasiek is approximately one hundred thousand strong, and most of those are a motley assortment of mercenaries—the principalities have fielded no more than ten thousand knights between them. Therefore, we need only bring our full might to bear and conquer our divided foes! And as the enemy possesses no airborne troops, the sky is ours. We've also cracked around eighty percent of the encryption used in their magical communications...although an old eastern code continues to give us trouble. Still, while we might miss a small unit, I swear on my honor that they can't move an army without our knowing about it."

I felt a little sorry for our enemies. They were practically going into battle naked.

Beside me, a flustered Sida murmured, "O Great Moon, am I in the future?"

"Liam, what about our supply lines?" asked Uncle Lucas.

"Don't worry. We'll have nothing to fear on that front," my dear father replied. “Isn’t that right, father-in-law?”

“It is, although I’d wager the Howards still outdo us,” said my dear grandfather, former Duke Leen Leinster. He had arrived late, followed by Maya, who had temporarily returned to active duty. I had never seen him in uniform before. The assembled commanders bowed instinctively as he continued, “I, Leen Leinster, will oversee the rear echelon of this campaign. But I’m just a figurehead—our brilliant young men and women will be doing all the real work. So fight without fear.”

“Yes, sir!”

Managing logistics for tens of thousands of troops on the march was a titanic undertaking. Supplies needed to be gathered, loaded onto wagons and other vehicles for transport, and distributed in proper quantities. And the whole process needed to be kept running smoothly, like the flow of blood through the body. It seemed simple at first glance, but in practice, there was no end of problems: constantly dwindling funds; securing space to store goods in bulk where they were needed; keeping horses, wyverns, griffins, and their riders in good health; maintaining roads, train tracks, and airways; and even the local weather. I felt dizzy just thinking about all the things that demanded attention.

Of course, my dear brother would probably make it all look easy. And so would the bespectacled head clerk whose acumen had earned his trust.

At that point, my dear sister broke her silence and said softly, “Father, assign me a duty too.”

“Lydia, you are to remain at headquarters with Lynne,” our dear father gravely commanded her. “You needn’t force yourself to fight at the front. In fact, I’d rather you stay here at home.”

The black-uniformed Lady of the Sword fixed him with an unwavering glare. “If the enemy has no air force, then we can use griffins to cause disruption behind their lines. That will end this war faster.”

Our dear father fell silent, but our dear mother approached and gave her a concerned embrace. “Don’t push yourself too hard, Lydia. It will be all right. Really, it will. Leave this to me, your father, and the rest of us.”

“I’m fine, mother,” my dear sister said after a long pause. “Won’t you please let me do this?”

“Lydia...” Our dear mother looked sorrowfully at her. Maya, Romy, and the other maids seemed worried too. Then our dear mother looked at our dear father, who nodded. “Very well, you have my permission to spread disruption behind enemy lines. But know your limits. Allen would be sad to see you run yourself ragged. Lily, look after Lydia and Lynne for me.”

“I know.” My dear sister nodded sullenly.

“Yes, ma’am! You can count on me!” Lily responded, saluting my dear mother with gusto.

Me too?! But no, our dear mother probably hopes that my dear sister will be less reckless if I’m with her. This just goes to show how precarious her condition really is.

My dear father thumped his desk, rose, and bellowed, “Now, off to victory! Let’s remind the world who we are!”

“Yes, sir!”

*

The sprawling Avasiek Plain straddled the border between the former principalities of Etna and Zana and the current principalities of Atlas and Bazel. Its level terrain was almost devoid of hills, to say nothing of rivers or marshland. As a result, it had been the scene of many great battles since ancient times...although I doubted that any of them had been as disastrous as this one.

I guided my griffin through the cloudy Iceday sky as I surveyed the war raging below.

“Lynne, we’re going to join the fray,” the lead griffin rider ordered over my hair clip. “The enemy headquarters is at the back of their lines. We’ll hit it now while they’re confused.”

“Y-Yes, dear sister!” I responded, scrambling to follow her lead.

A force of maids under Lily’s command flew behind us. They numbered fewer than twenty, but all were officers or seasoned fighters.

This battle, which would probably go down in history as the “Annihilation at Avasiek,” had begun in an irregular manner. Our intelligence had proved correct—the league’s armies were a hundred thousand strong. The forces of our southern houses, meanwhile, numbered roughly thirty thousand. And at their head stood Lisa Leinster with her enchanted sword, Scarlet Raven, in hand. My dear mother had faced down the confused enemy ranks and bellowed:

“Has no one in all your army the courage to challenge the Bloodstained Lady?!”

Over a dozen brave souls had leapt forward to take the challenge, incensed. None had lasted even a single exchange of blows.

While the enemy reeled in shock, my dear mother had shown no mercy, conjuring four massive Firebirds at once. The stunned soldiers had been helpless, unable to believe their eyes as the supreme fire spells engulfed them. Even the ranks behind them seemed on the verge of panic.

Our maids tore through knights and mercenaries, while the Scarlet Order charged in perfect formation, plowing through the enemy lines. On the wings, our cavalry, both magical and conventional, was in the process of surrounding the league’s armies, scattering enemy soldiers before it. I doubted that our reserve forces—my house’s personal guards and knights from across the south—would have anything to do.

Throughout it all, several hundred griffins wheeled over the battlefield, launching continuous assaults. They encountered no organized resistance. I doubted that griffins had ever before seen such concerted use in combat. Even so, this debacle proved that the armies of Atlas and Bazel really did have no conception of airpower.

“Don’t forget this is a battlefield, Lady Lynne. You’d better stay focused,” Lily transmitted from behind me. Nothing got past her.

“I...I know that!” I responded, startled. Then I gave the Great Moon charm around my neck a squeeze. Sida had pressed it on me before we had marched, tearfully insisting that I take at least this with me. I didn’t worship her deity, but maybe the charm would still do something to steady my nerves.

“I can see it,” my dear sister murmured as we soared over the disordered enemy lines.

Up ahead, I could glimpse a pavilion flying conspicuously large battle standards of Atlas and Bazel—the enemy headquarters. Unsurprisingly, it was fairly well guarded. This called for a magical bombardment from the air. But before I could share my opinion with my dear sister, she rode her griffin high into the sky...and jumped off alone.

“Dear sister!” I cried.

“Oh, Lady Lydiaaa, that’s not safe!” Lily whined at almost the same moment.

The enemy guards were taken aback by the sudden appearance of a girl in their midst.

"You're in my way," my dear sister said, her voice cold, as she unleashed flames all around her. She had cast Divine Fire Wave, an elementary spell, but with extraordinary power! With that one strike, she had ignited most of the encampment and deprived the knights and soldiers of their arms. Cowed enemies scattered in confusion.

And she hadn't killed a single person—only burned them at worst. What superhuman control!

"Lady Lynne, we'll join her down there," Lily commanded. "And I'd like half of you to stand by in midair."

"Oh, right," I responded. "Do as Lily says!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

A number of maids brought their griffins up to higher altitudes, while the rest cast fire-resistant barriers and descended along with Lily and me. Our force landed safely, and our griffins returned to the skies.

My dear sister paid no heed to us as she slowly unsheathed her swords. As I'd thought, the new one seemed to be magical.

I saw two flashes. Then the burning pavilion before us fell, slashed to ribbons, as did the massive battle standards. And yet...

"Why does no one come out?" I murmured.

"Lynne, get back!" my dear sister barked. "Lily!"

"What?"

"You got it!" Lily scooped me up in her arms and yanked me backward.

An instant later, hulking, heavily armored knights in boxy helms sprang out of the flames on either side, their sights set on my dear sister! I counted eight in all—two each carrying greatswords, pikes, battle-axes, and war hammers.

The two nearest knights on the right raised their weapons—a greatsword and a war hammer—and brought them down on my dear sister with all their—

"Too slow." She darted past her armored assailants, leaving horizontal slashes across their bodies. Then she laid into the pike- and axe-wielders on the other side of them, cleaving through heavy plate, and cast a Firebird behind her. The avian menace crashed into the knights on the left, engulfing them in flames.

Then came the applause.

"Splendid. Simply splendid."

"How easily you dispatched those eight. Your reputation is deserved."

My dear sister did not dignify the two strange men who emerged from the burning wreck of the pavilion with a response. Both wore gray robes and had designs inscribed onto their cheeks—one on his right and the other, his left. And they were utterly undaunted in my dear sister's presence.

What is this sinister mana? It reminds me of the aura Prince Gerard gave off when he lost control at the Royal Academy testing ground.

"I didn't sense you there," said my dear sister, readying her swords. "You used a teleportation spell. Who are you?"

"Who indeed," one man replied.

"Knowing could do you no good, cursed child of the Leinsters," added the other.

"I'm not cursed," my dear sister said slowly, her tone icier than ever. She raised her swords to strike, when—

"Dear sister!"

"Lady Lydia!"

She clicked her tongue and leapt backward. A moment later, the knights' weapons crashed down right where she had been standing.

But I know she defeated them! How are all eight still standing?!

If not for my dear brother's lessons, I would have been too shocked to draw my sword and cast a spell. But I swiftly conjured a Firebird on the tip of my blade and launched it at one of the knights. The maids soon raised their own weapons and cast a barrage of advanced spells. Only Lily didn't provide covering fire; she readied spells but kept them in reserve as she intently studied the knights.

My Firebird and the maids' spells all found their marks. And yet...

"L-Look there!"

"Shields of..."

"Light?"

"Magic isn't working!"

One eye glowed eerily in each knight's helmet as eight shining barriers took form. The maids' spells all bounced harmlessly off the shields. My Firebird broke through three shields, but fresh barriers projected from the knights' gauntlets and armor as it struck the fourth, and it disintegrated.

They're immune to supreme magic?!

My dear sister regained her balance and narrowed her eyes. "Radiant Shield," she muttered. "And Resurrection. Just like that brainless prince."

The gray-robed men roared with laughter.

"Oh, you've noticed, have you?" said one. "But don't lump these in with that first, flawed prototype deployed in your eastern capital. We've progressed past the need for human hosts!"

"These spell-soldiers are imbued not only with Radiant Shield and Resurrection—great spells our leader recreated in the modern world—but with fire-resistant barriers designed expressly for your capture," crowed the other. "Leinster flames have no effect on them. Still, I never imagined that you would rush into our snare so eagerly. All is as our leader foretold."

The maids and I were stunned.

Does...Does that mean we're *the ones caught in a trap? And my dear sister is its target?!*

"Spell-soldiers," Lily murmured, suddenly looking grave. "Artificial knights once made in the Yustinian Empire. I believe they used human corpses...but I'd heard the technology has been lost since the War of the Dark Lord, and that the Lalannoy Republic's efforts to recreate it proved unsuccessful. And more importantly—"

"It's a clear violation of the Human-Demon Accords," my dear sister interjected. "I don't know how you're casting Radiant Shield and Resurrection, but for now...just die." With a sweep of her sword, she sent a Firebird hurtling toward the eight spell-soldiers.

"You're wasting your time!" scoffed one of the gray-robed men.

"We've nothing to fear from the flames of a cursed child!" sneered his companion.

"Don't call me cursed!" my dear sister roared as her Firebird grew in size and power. It was almost indistinguishable from our dear mother's.

The spell-soldiers deployed their eight shields.

Then came the clash. Three shields collapsed instantly. After that, countless fire-resistant barriers activated to support the rest. But the Firebird still pierced the fourth, fifth, and sixth shields and began to crack the seventh.

Complacency left the men's faces as a gust of searing air threw back their hoods. Both had pale-blond hair, and I spotted gold chains around their necks. What were those for?

"Inquisitors of the Holy Spirit," Lily muttered under her breath.

"Rolog!" yelled the man with a writhing spell formula on his right cheek. "We must do our duty as new apostles!"

"Racom!" the man with a formula on his left cheek responded. "I'd hoped to experiment a little longer, but needs must!"

They held up talismans in both their hands, unleashing a dark-gray flash.

Wh-What on earth?!

Without warning, the men and knights vanished. Deprived of its target, the Firebird careened deeper into the camp, sparking a burst of hellfire where it struck.

"What? Lily?!" I cried an instant later as the older girl scooped me up in her right arm.

"Everyone, retreat as fast as you can! Lydia!" she shouted, with far greater urgency than she normally used as a maid. Even the way she spoke to my dear sister was a throwback to the old days.

The maids didn't know what to make of the situation, but they still leapt backward with all their might. Lily followed suit, and we landed in the group's front rank. After setting me down, she cast a spell with a sharp sideways sweep of her left hand.

Just then, I sensed mana so abhorrent that it made my skin crawl. With the screech of metal grating against metal, dark-gray objects converged on the space we had so recently occupied. The maids and I fell to our knees as an intense pressure swept over us, but we all still screamed my dear sister's name.

Eight dark-gray chains had sprung from the ground, holding her fast. Staggering mana surged through the sinister restraints coiled around her arms, legs, body, and both her swords. The eight spell-soldiers had reappeared, each with one eye glowing, and the chains came from their arms.

A binding?! And those talismans were teleportation spells! But a barrier this powerful is... It's inconceivable!

Neither the maids nor I could stand under the pressure, and we weren't even caught in the spell—merely suffering the effects of its proximity. But while we could barely move, Lily stood alone, shielding us with an impromptu wall of blazing flowers. How much worse off would we have been without her? And what must my dear sister have been going through?

The gray-robed men reappeared near the farthest spell-soldiers, laughing maniacally.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" one sneered. "You'll feel better when you give up and fall to your knees! Don't worry; we'll spare your life for the time being. We've grown tired of diluted Wainwright blood, but as a lineal descendant of the Leinsters and a cursed child, yours will enable our research to reach new heights."

"This strategic binding spell is called the Eightfold Divine Seal," the other added. "It was made to capture the Eight Heresies and their thralls. Although it's meant to be cast with eight great spells, two are enough to hold a two-winged devil and more than enough for a dormant cursed child. You can't use your flames in there. Surrender!"

Within the barrier, my dear sister gritted her teeth. Blood trickled from her mouth. The dark-gray chains bound her tighter until, at last, her swords fell and lodged in the ground.

"Dear sister!" I cried, thrusting my blade into the earth and struggling to pull myself to my feet. But my body was heavy as lead, and I couldn't lift it.

The man with the writhing formula on his right cheek let out a derisive laugh. "This is all the famed 'Lady of the Sword' amounts to. Remind me, Rolog: what was that man's name? The mock beast I hear Lev brought down in the eastern capital."

"It was Allen, Racom," his companion replied. "An abominable name. Apparently, the heretic fought well, for a mock beast. But in the end, he was no match for us new apostles."

M-My dear brother l-lost?! To these men's allies?! My body shook as my strength left me. *That...That can't be true. They're lying. My...My dear brother wouldn't—*

"Lady Lynne!" Lily snapped. "Allen would never lose to the likes of them! They must have resorted to the dirtiest of tricks!"

I started. The maid was still on her feet and looking straight ahead.

"Oh, yes, that *was* his name," Racom sneered. "Cursed child, they say the mock beast put up quite a fight. But his end must have been gruesome—unlike us, Lev doesn't show mercy."

"I heard he fought to the bitter end to 'protect your honor.'" Rolog let out a mocking laugh. "Your pet mock beast was quite devoted to his mistress."

Silence fell. Then my dear sister murmured, "I see. He said he did it for my 'honor,' did he?" Her right hand grasped a chain, and the barrier let out a metallic cacophony as it trembled.

Racom and Rolog must have noticed the change, because they barked orders to the spell-soldiers.

"Tighter! Bind her tighter!"

"And be quick about it! Make her kneel and submit!"

I could sense the force on my dear sister increase. But although she staggered, she did not kneel. Far from it—her right hand was still tightening its grip on the chain. Her head hung low as she murmured, "I'd already given up."

The men looked flummoxed.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you gone mad from the pain?"

My dear sister didn't answer. "Until not long ago," she continued to herself, "people called me 'the Leinsters' cursed child.' I was born into a ducal house known for its fire, but when I was little, I could only light a candle wick. I read every book I could find and worked as hard as I could...but the only magic I could learn was how to strengthen my own body."

I felt a pang in my chest. I didn't want to remember what my dear sister had been like before the Royal Academy.

"People don't look kindly on a duke's daughter like that. They called me 'defective,' 'unfit for a ducal house,' 'a blight on the Leinster name.' Some even told me to drop my surname and be done with it. I...I lost hope. The world I saw was far, far too dismal—like night without a single star."

The maids began to weep when she murmured, "Even though my family and our people loved me." Tears clouded my vision as well.

"But no one as defective as I could ever hope for a star. And I couldn't...I couldn't go on walking in this pitch-dark world. I'd given up."

The men were losing patience. "What are you prattling about?!" one snapped, while the other barked, "Stop speaking non—"

The screech of chains cut his words short as the whole barrier shook.

My dear sister raised her voice. "So I told myself that I'd make one last wish, then never again! I screwed up my courage—the last dregs of it—and took the Royal Academy entrance exam. And that's where I met him. I thought it was...a miracle." She raised her head, revealing an awkward smile. No one who saw it could fail to realize how deeply she cared for my dear brother. “I took one look at him, and I knew. I’d prayed, and prayed, and prayed to meet him—to meet someone who would take my hand and guide me.”

Fire began to spread along the chains. Even the unfeeling spell-soldiers seemed shaken.

“I still can’t help laughing when I look back on what I was like then,” my dear sister continued. “I did my best to put up a brave front, but he interested me so much more than our opponent, the headmaster. And my instinct was right.” She beamed. Her tone was bright and a little bashful—totally out of place on the battlefield. She seemed just like any ordinary girl as she confessed, “He saw my swordplay and called it beautiful. My spellcasting was at the level of a child, and he said I could be the best sorceress in the world. He...He called me charming, even though I’m anything but.”

Her every word conveyed how much my dear brother’s remarks had meant to her and how deeply she loved him.

"That...That was all it took to give me strength!" Her tone took a sudden turn into self-mockery as she added, "I doubt anyone else in the world would understand."

Racom and Rolog screamed.

"E-Enough!"

"C-Cease this—"

But my dear sister ignored them. "He gave me so, so many things," she continued to herself. "Kindness, gentleness, the embarrassment of holding hands, the joy of being held, feelings of jealousy toward other girls he was close to, the warmth of a shoulder to lean on...and proof of how truly, truly happy I could feel just by being with him!"

Neither we nor the gray-robed men could get a word in edgewise. Logically, there was nothing to stop us. But instinctively, we all understood—if we interrupted her monologue, the result would be disastrous.

"I was hopeless! 'The Leinsters' cursed child'! But he didn't just save me from the depths of darkness; he walked alongside me. He kept walking with me from the moment we met. He always, *always* held my hand! I know he had to put up with so many insults and go through so much misery just for being with me...but he never breathed a word of it."

I could clearly sense a bottomless well of mana within my dear sister, struggling to burst forth. Plumes of flame finally appeared within the strategic binding spell. Not only the chains, but the very space that composed the barrier began to burn.

"Forging ahead is terrifying. It takes courage. And I...didn't have a scrap of courage left," she admitted, more feebly than I had ever heard her before. "Even with him at my side, I was just so scared. I don't know how many tens, hundreds, thousands, millions of times I wanted to stop. But..." She held her head high. Her eyes blazed with indomitable will...and an all-consuming, purgatorial flame. "He believed in me. He put more faith in me than in anyone else—even himself! He kept leading me by the hand through this good-for-nothing world!"

At last, all eight chains were blazing. The blood was draining from the men's faces.

"And he taught me that this world is worth living in!" my dear sister screamed. “That even I had someone to walk with!”

Her gaze burned with determination and resolve. I could feel the torrent of her mana raging within the barrier.

“So...So how can I stop before he does?!” she demanded. “My name is Lydia Leinster. I longed for a star, prayed for it, loved it...and lost it through my own foolishness. I’m worthless after that. To be honest, I don’t even have the courage to keep going—I don’t see the point. But you know...” For the first time, she looked at Racom and Rolog. The men stood frozen, as immobile as if they’d been petrified. “I need to go to the eastern capital, no matter what it costs me. Ever since I first met him, I’ve known where I’m going to die—at his side. And nothing, not even his anger, will change my mind! Nothing! My ‘honor’? My only honor is being Allen’s sword! Nothing else matters!”

A scarlet mark began to shine on the back of her right hand as she tightened her white-knuckle grip on the chain.

“I don’t care who or what you are,” she practically spat. “Mimic ancient legends all you like; it makes no difference to me. I have only one thing to say to you.”

A myriad of whirling, fiery plumes filled the barrier. Cracks shot through all eight chains. And then...

“Get out of my way!” my dear sister roared as she yanked her right hand down, pulling the chain with it.

An instant later, space itself bent, creaked, and screeched as the chains shattered in rapid succession. The strategic binding spell collapsed and disintegrated. The spell-soldiers reeled, and a weight lifted from our bodies. We were stunned into silence, while the gray-robed men’s faces twisted in alarm.

“I-Impossible!” Racom wailed. “N-No human can tear through even an incomplete version of that binding with her bare hands! I...I won’t tolerate such nonsense!”

“Spell-soldiers!” Rolog cried. “Stop that freak! Kill her if you must!”

The eight spell-soldiers responded immediately. Chains fired from their feet, launching them forward with agility that belied their bulk as they lunged at my dear sister from all sides. Yet she remained motionless, her hands on the hilts of her swords, which were still stuck in the ground.

“Dear sister!” I screamed. “Watch out!”

The spell-soldiers were in the act of bringing their greatswords, pikes, battle-axes, and war hammers down on her head when a thunderous roar shook the air. A shower of dust shot high into the sky above. Lily, the maids, and I quickly cast barriers to shield ourselves.

A shiver ran down my spine.

What...What is this mana?! I've n-never felt anything so ominous!

"Lily?" I called. The older girl stood before me, and her face in profile looked grimmer than I had ever seen it.

"Visibility will soon be restored, Lady Lynne," she said without looking at me. This dispassionate report was a far cry from her usual tone.

Gradually, the dust settled. Haltingly, I murmured, "Dear sister...?"

The Lady of the Sword glared down at the eight spell-soldiers from midair, wreathed in four wings of flame. And yet...And yet, I couldn't keep from trembling. These were nothing like the shining white wings that she had shown me at the Royal Academy, when she had linked mana with my dear brother. The wings shrouding my dear sister, Lydia Leinster, were red as blood.

While we stood speechless, Racom and Rolog shrieked.

"What are you doing?! Kill her! Kill her now!"

"Quickly! Slay the cursed child! Hurry, before it's too late! If that woman fully awakens, the world itself will be her—"

Before he could finish, the spell-soldiers all conjured more chains from their feet and shot skyward.

Oh no!

I scrambled to cast a Firebird, but the maid corps's number three raised a hand to stop me.

"Lily?!" I cried. But I had no time to say more.

My dear sister muttered something I couldn't make out. An instant later, all eight airborne spell-soldiers were cleaved in two.

Sh-She cut them all down at once?! And now she's standing on the ground! I couldn't see her move at all.

The gray light of Resurrection still flashed, trying to piece the spell-soldiers back together in midair. My dear sister's wings became swords and struck at them before they had the chance. The knights tried to defend themselves using Radiant Shield, but her crimson blades traced geometric patterns as they flashed through the air, shredding the powerful barriers with ease. A storm of rapid slashes carved up the spell-soldiers and left them to fall in a burning heap.

The maids, the gray-robed men, and I all froze in astonishment.

She sliced through Radiant Shield and outpaced Resurrection? And before that, how on earth did she move fast enough to—

“Short-range tactical teleportation,” Lily murmured. “She’s already mastered the spell formulae from Allen’s notes.”

My dear sister raised her swords and slowly turned to face Racom and Rolog. Plumes of flame danced madly over the whole area, resonating with her mana to spread the fire.

“M-Monster!” Rolog shrieked at her.

“Now it’s come to this; we’ve only one choice left,” Racom said. “Rolog!”

His companion groaned. “Very well.”

Both men reached into the folds of their gray robes and produced little glass vials of...blood? Each crushed one in his fist. The spell formulae on their cheeks began to pulse with a bright yet baleful light.

My dear sister narrowed her eyes. “That’s Gerard’s blood.”

“We are new apostles, chosen by the Saint!” Racom cried.

“We shall put all heretics to the sword!” Rolog added.

Then, together, they roared, “Praise be to the Saint and the Holy Spirit!”

The mana of the fallen spell-soldiers formed a great, dark-gray tornado and engulfed the pair. The spectacle was so outlandish that we stared at it in stunned amazement, forgetting even to cast spells at them.

Wh-What on earth...?

A massive arm burst out of the vortex and swung down at my dear sister, who clicked her tongue and retreated in the opposite direction from us. The arm slammed into the ground with a crash, splitting the surface and sending up an enormous dust cloud.

“Wh-What?” I asked, wide-eyed, my voice trembling. “What is that th-thing?”

Before us loomed a colossal dark-gray spell-soldier. Magic must have refashioned the sturdy armor that ensconced it. Its right hand clutched a chain-wrapped greatsword, and its eyes shone eerily through the slit in its helmet. The thing must have stood taller than the clock tower I’d seen at the station in the eastern capital. Giants lived in the west of the kingdom, but it was easily twice—no, triple their size. It looked at least a dozen times the height of any human

man. But what did that matter?!

"It's a big target!" I shouted. "Everyone, focus your fire!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the startled maids responded.

We all hit the giant spell-soldier with a barrage of the strongest magic we could muster. Only Lily refrained, although she was weaving several spells of her own. My Firebird and dozens of advanced spells of varying elements reached the colossus...only to be reflected back at us by a dark-gray shield far more sinister than any we had seen so far.

Oh no! Unless we act quickly—

"Not on my watch!" Lily darted forward and swung both her arms wide. Her fivefold wall of blazing flowers weathered the rebounding spells.

While we were still too stunned to act, the giant spell-soldier swung its greatsword aloft and carelessly brought the weapon down in front of us. The ground shook violently as the blade gouged a furrow in the earth and sent a cloud of dust high into the sky. I had difficulty just keeping on my feet, and even Lily's face was drawn.

"Stay there and watch," the thing commanded, certain of its own superiority. "Watch as we kill the cursed child."

I know these voices—Racom and Rolog!

The maids and I tried to raise our swords and begin weaving spells, but my arms were trembling with fear.

H-How can we possibly f-fight something like this?

"Tell me something," my dear sister said quietly from behind the colossus, her eyes lowered.

The giant spell-soldier conjured numerous dark-gray shields and raised its sword as it turned.

"You got that power from Gerard's Wainwright blood—the blood of an ancient legend," she continued, slowly allowing her swords to droop into a comfortable position. "I'm guessing your boss is starting a collection for her experiments and using blood as a medium to seize control of multiple great spells. Do I have that right? And...And that would mean there's a good chance you took him alive." Her last words seemed directed more at herself than our enemies.

"We're not interested in keeping mock beasts," the transformed Racom and Rolog sneered. "He must have died like a dog, and we're about to send you to join him. We can take all the blood we need from your corpse!"

They shifted to a two-handed grip on their greatsword and raised it high over their head. My dear sister stood rooted to the spot.

I tried to spur my quaking body into action, but the maid ahead of me intervened.

"Lily?!" I cried.

"You mustn't!" she snapped.

An instant later, the giant spell-soldier swung its greatsword down at my dear sister. But to the apostles' consternation, the severed top half of their blade went sailing through the air and lodged in the earth. The weapon in my dear sister's right hand was responsible.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked, with fear in my voice. "Wh-What are those swords?"

I hadn't noticed the change before, but Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, held blades shrouded in flames of bloody crimson and lightless, inky black. Was this the Scarlet Sword, our house's secret art? But...But my dear sister's Scarlet Sword had never been so ominous.

"Curse you, fieeend!" Racom and Rolog bellowed as they swung their broken sword. I could hear terror in their voices.

My dear sister looked up. "Yes? Didn't you know? To save him..." The number of wings on her back grew to six, and each fiery appendage turned dark crimson. A deep red suffused her eyes as she roared, "I'll become a fiend or a devil or whatever else it takes!"

The black and crimson flames around her swords flared. The blades scythed horizontally through the air, leaving glowing trails in their wake as they cleaved through the colossus's torso along with dozens of the dark-gray shields that guarded it. A downward, vertical sword stroke followed almost immediately, slicing through even the clouds above.

"I-Inconceivable!" the spell-soldier shrieked in alarm.

A grotesque Firebird with three heads and six wings barreled into the quartered giant, scattering dusky crimson plumes as it flew. The ensuing burst of unearthly hellfire incinerated everything it touched.

I clung tightly to Lily's waist as I cowered behind her. I was frightened. Simply terrified! And not of the spell-soldier, but of my dear sister!

I can't stop shaking. This...This isn't right!

The colossus that had looked down on us was crumbling out of existence. The apostles emerged from within it, bloodied and gasping for breath, but alive. Racom panted, "I...I don't believe it," while Rolog seemed too winded for words. Their hair had turned shock white, perhaps from straining their mana to its limits. With trembling hands, they drew talismans from their robes.

"Where do you think you're going?" my dear sister icily demanded. "I still have questions for you."

"Silence, fiend! We'll kill you next time!" one man roared.

"You pose too great a threat," added the other. "As our leader says, you may well bring about calamity. We were naive to think we could imprison you. Next time, we'll take your life, and reunite you with your 'Brain' in purgatory."

"Will you, now?" my dear sister said slowly. The fiery battlefield suddenly felt much chillier.

Racom and Rolog deployed their talismans and vanished from sight.

No! They'll get aw—

My dear sister casually swung her left-hand sword. Space tore open diagonally ahead of her, and four burning objects tumbled from the rent as agonized screams filled the air. One of the men had lost his right arm at the shoulder, and the other, his left.

She cut *the teleportation spell?!*

"Tactical teleportation magic can only cover short distances. Tracking the caster's mana and slicing through it isn't so difficult if you see it coming," the Lady of the Sword said coldly. "That's another trick he taught me. Now, tell me everything you know."

The men rose, casting healing spells on the stumps of their arms, and looked at each other. Their eyes were bloodshot.

"Rolog!" shouted one.

"I know, Racom," the other responded. "I'm with you!"

With that, they tore off the tattered remains of their gray robes. Half of each man's body was covered in a spell formula that writhed and squirmed like a living thing.

"We are martyrs!" Racom yelled. "Death holds no fear for us!"

"We are defenders of the faith!" Rolog bellowed. "Devils shall fall before us!"

Then, in unison, "The Saint and the Holy Spirit wish it so!"

Their bloodshot eyes remained fixed on my dear sister as each man plunged a hand into his own heart.

We were aghast. Before I could make sense of what had happened, the men's mana began to surge. Their bodies floated off the ground as the spell formulae that covered them contracted into their hearts.

A suicide attack?!

"Prepare for maximum defense!" Lily commanded, her tone deadly serious.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" The flustered maids circled in front of me and began casting barrier spells in rapid succession.

"Dear sister!" I cried. But her back remained turned, and she did not respond.

Racom's and Rolog's whole bodies were turning dark gray. Blood trickled from their mouths even as their lips twisted in hideous sneers.

"Perish, fiend!"

"The Saint and the Holy Spirit will soon have one fewer foe!"

My dear sister fixed the men with a frosty glare and raised her swords. "I'm not scared of dying," she murmured. "I already died once that day four years ago, when I fought the black dragon. But..." Her fiery wings blazed even larger. "I don't want or need a world without him in it. Being able to stay at his side is enough for me. And anything that gets in the way"—her voice rose to a roar—"should all! Just! Disappear!"

"Dieee!" Racom and Rolog bellowed in unison as their mana concentrated and then burst. In the same moment, my dear sister's blades gleamed black and crimson.

A violent gust swept over the battlefield. We braced for the explosion. Then, realization set in.

"They didn't detonate?" I muttered, incredulous.

I looked up to see Racom's and Rolog's faces contorted in shock as they haltingly gasped, "Y-You cut the blast itself? Fie—"

Before that final insult left their mouths, they crumbled to dust in the wind.

Although stunned by the apostles' anticlimactic end, I pulled myself together. But just when I was about to address my dear sister, Lily shouted, "We're not out of the woods yet! The enemy is closing in!"

The principalities' reserve forces were advancing on us. They must have been watching our battle from the sidelines. There must have been a thousand—no, ten thousand of them, and their standards marked them as regular troops!

We're badly outnumbered and surrounded. Retreating by griffin might be our best option.

But while I panicked, my dear sister calmly glanced at the army. "They keep coming. Don't they realize I need to join him?" she muttered angrily. Then she turned to the scarlet ribbon on her right wrist and whispered sweetly, as if to my dear brother, "Listen, you don't mind, do you? It's their fault for getting in my way."

She thrust her swords into the ground and dropped to one knee as if in prayer—a gesture that she had just fought so hard to avoid. Unfathomable mana shook heaven and earth as eight wings of dusky crimson flame unfurled.

The enemy forces noticed the change and launched a barrage of offensive magic. Well over a thousand spells rained down on my dear sister, but her wings perfectly intercepted every one. The enemy standards wavered in the face of the impossible spectacle as their mounted commander barked orders to continue the attack. Amid the chaos, my dear sister's swords began to shine black and crimson, and an unbelievably precise spell formula that I had never seen before spread over the ground around her.

No sooner had Lily set eyes on it than she let out a tense shout. "Deploy your strongest fire-resistant barriers! You too, Lady Lynne!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The maids were taken aback, but they still obeyed without delay.

"What? R-Right!" I added, joining in as best I could.

Ahead of me, Lily spread her arms wide and conjured seven flower-shaped shields of fire.

Once again, a beast-like insignia appeared on the back of my dear sister's right hand, blazing with a bloodred light. An instant later, she whispered the name of her spell:

"Merciless Sword of the Fire Fiend."

First, I felt the ground tremble and heard a wailing roar. Then, innumerable blades of crimson flame split the earth, joined by thorny briars that seemed suffused with blood. Neither wasted any time in assaulting the enemy army. Screams, sobs, and cries of pain filled the battlefield air. Arms and armor shattered with gouts of blood, and the dusky crimson flames consumed it all, reshaping the very landscape.

We struggled desperately to maintain our barriers. We had raised at least a hundred fireproof walls, but mere proximity to this spell was rapidly demolishing them. To be perfectly honest...I had no idea what was happening. The maids around me shrieked and cowered. Only Lily remained standing tall, keeping up her floral shield of fire.

At last, all sound ceased. Timidly, I looked around and—

“Wh-What?! Wh-What happened here?!” I cried, clinging to Lily in my panic.

We now found ourselves on the crown of a low hill. Nowhere else had escaped unscathed. All around us, the plain had been reduced to a burning field of swords and thorns. Every scrap of arms or armor in our enemies’ possession had been sliced to ribbons, and all their banners set alight. The briars surrounded and enclosed the troops like living serpents of fire. Amid the stench of burning, I could see every soldier in the enemy force on the ground, some clutching their heads, while others prayed to their gods or quivered like leaves.

Sh-She cast a spell on this scale without killing anyone?!

“A taboo tactical fire spell,” Lily murmured.

“A taboo?” I repeated, stunned. This was what I had seen in my dear sister’s room—magic so powerful that both human and demonkind had agreed to prohibit its use even two centuries ago, during the War of the Dark Lord. Admittedly, the accords permitted its use if the enemy violated them first. So, given that our foes had not only invoked the great spells Resurrection and Radiant Shield but even deployed spell-soldiers, my dear sister had broken no law. But...But even so, this...this was beyond the pale!

“Don’t move, don’t make a fuss, and don’t annoy me,” my dear sister commanded, her emotionless voice projected across the battlefield by wind magic. “If you do, you’ll either die right here and now or die later for wasting my time. The choice is yours.”

I could sense the enemy army’s morale collapse instantly and utterly. Even those who had managed to cling to the remains of their weapons dropped the broken arms and raised their hands. I doubted that any of them would ever try to challenge my house again.

My dear sister pulled her swords from the ground, stood, and sheathed them. Her wings and the mark on her hand faded, and her eyes resumed their usual color. Then, she turned and walked toward us, saying, “It’s over. Lily, contact my parents. They can handle the mopping up.”

She passed by us without waiting for a response. I sheathed my sword and hurried to follow her.

“Lydia,” our cousin called forlornly from behind us.

My dear sister stopped but did not answer.

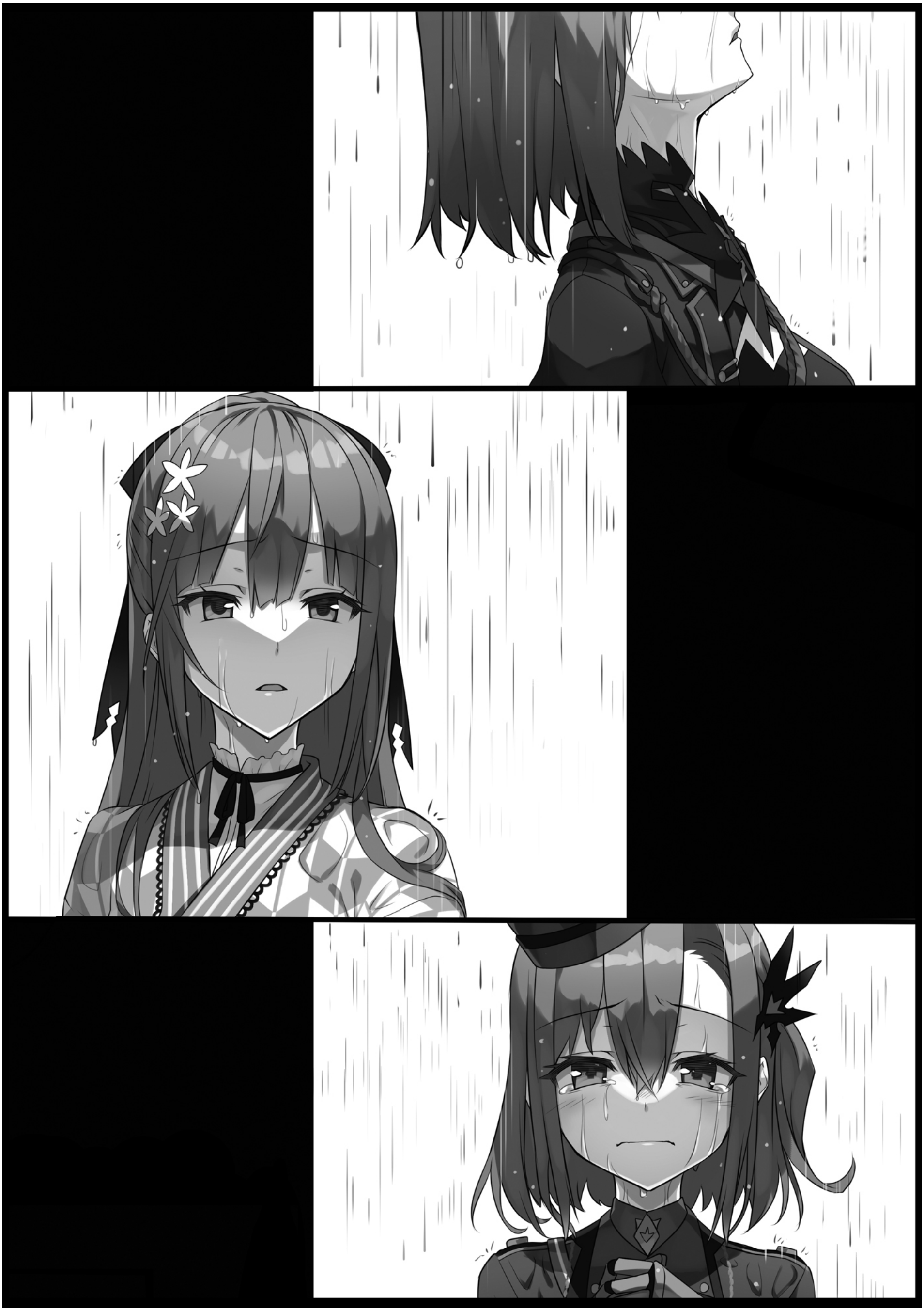
“You shouldn’t do things like this,” Lily continued, practically sobbing. “Allen...Allen would be so sad to see you this way.”

My dear sister gave a momentary shudder. Then, something cold struck my forehead.

Rain?

Lashed by the chilly downpour, my dear sister turned to look not at our cousin, but up at the sky. “You might be right,” she said. “It would upset him. He’d probably give me a real talking-to and keep it up until I apologized. But...” She sounded on the verge of tears as her voice sank to an almost inaudible whisper. “But Allen isn’t with me now.”

Dear sister. I felt a pang in my heart as she resumed walking. Clutching Sida’s charm to my breast, I prayed with all my might. *Dear brother, please,* please *be safe! Otherwise, my...my dear sister’s heart will break. And I can’t save her. How could I when I’m...I’m frightened of her?*



On this day, the Leinsters led the houses of the south to victory in open battle over the combined armies of the Principalities of Atlas and Bazel—a triumph so total that it would doubtless go down in the annals of military history. We had routed the main enemy force, captured the bulk of their mercenaries, and even seized vast stores of matériel, yet not a single one of our own fighters had been killed in action. Apparently, some of the captured mercenaries suffered from...illnesses of the mind.

But despite our historic victory, the atmosphere in our main camp that night was somber. The revelation that the Church of the Holy Spirit lurked in the league presaged more difficult battles to come. But the greatest cause of our gloom was Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, who slept like the dead in a corner of the encampment. I couldn't bear to see her like that: still wearing her black dress, her beautiful scarlet hair cut short, hugging her swords, her stopped pocket watch, and the ribbon stained with my dear brother's blood—the ends of which her spells had singed black in the battle. No one could look at her without remembering what she had been like in the old days, when she had been "the Leinsters' cursed child" and put her faith in nothing but her sword—not her family, not the world, and not even herself. In those days, before she had gone to the Royal Academy and met my dear brother, she had been on the verge of being swallowed up by darkness.

When Sida moved, conscientiously, to draw a blanket over my dear sister, I could say only, "Stop. Don't you value your life?"

Epilogue

"Perfect!" I declared, nodding as I checked my equipment in my makeshift sickroom within the Great Tree. I had my Royal Academy uniform and beret, my dagger in its brand-new pale-violet sheath. Last of all, I picked up the watch that Allen had left with me and slipped it into my pocket. Even my mana was fully recovered from the ordeal that had exhausted it.

Allen must feel that miserable every time.

I could faintly make out the sounds of fighting outside, unmistakably closer than they'd been a few days ago. I had no time to lose.

When I ran my fingers along my sheath, I felt as though I could hear my brother's kind voice saying, "Don't worry, Caren. Calm down. You can do this." A sharp pain shot through my heart.

Six days had passed since Allen had left me and gone to rescue the people of New Town. The knights of the royal guard, the militia, and the volunteers were still fighting tooth and nail to defend the Great Tree. The knights who had gone with Allen were especially fierce, as were Sui and the other militia members that they'd rescued. They fought like—

The door burst open with cries of "Caren?!" and "Oh, Caren, you should be in bed."

"Kaya. Koko." I greeted my old friends from the squirrel and leopard clans as they ran up to me, looking worried. They both wore white, since they had volunteered to help tend to the injured.

"I'm fine now," I said firmly. "I can fight."

"Caren! No!" Kaya exclaimed.

"That's right," Koko added in her usual languid tone. "The chieftains say we children have to stay in the Great Tree."

"I don't care!" I snapped, gritting my teeth. "That makes no difference to me!"

The plaza had already fallen; the middle of the Great Bridge was the new front line. Lord Richard's knights, Rolo's militia, and the many volunteers were fighting their hardest just to hang on.

"The chieftains are shut up in their council chamber having pointless arguments that go in circles!" I growled. "Why should I listen to a word they say?! Allen's not dead! I know he's not! Who's going to go save him if I don't?!"

Kaya and Koko hung their heads and fell silent. They both understood.

"Thanks for worrying about me. Try to help my mom," I said and left the room.

The inside of the Great Tree was thronged with people—mostly elders, women, and children. Even my dad and the other magical craftsmen were outside, helping to build and repair barricades. Occasionally, the front door opened and a litter darted inside, bearing someone whose severe injuries were obvious even at a distance. I ignored the scene and made for the entrance.

On the way, I glimpsed Toneri, son of the wolf-clan chieftain, and his lackeys. Anyone could see how haggard and scared they were, and Kume of the rat clan was missing. He must not have made it out in time.

Girls roughly my own age stood before the door. One was a human knight, the other a goat-clan militiawoman.

"You're Mr. Allen's sister," one called when she spotted me.

"You're not allowed outside!" added the other.

"Please let me through," I said. "I need to go help my brother."

The knight looked startled, but she responded, "The vice commander gave me strict orders. His exact words were 'Don't let Caren near the battlefield. Allen left her in my care, and I'm a man of my word.'"

"And Captain Rolo and Sui both told me not to let you out!" echoed her companion.

Lord Richard had returned to the Great Tree with grievous injuries, but he had only waited for the most basic first aid before coming to tell my parents and me what had happened on the battlefield. When he finished, my mom had broken down sobbing, and my dad had hugged her, trembling himself. I had been dumbfounded.

"If only...If only I'd been just a little stronger," the battered Lord Richard had said, his face twisted in anguish. "We would never have left Allen back there if I hadn't let my guard down and gotten injured like a fool! I, Richard Leinster, accept full responsibility. When...When this is all over, please, punish me however you see fit."

His words saddened me. I felt as though my heart would break. Yet I wasn't surprised. I knew my brother. He put others before himself, and he'd never hesitate to run to their aid—especially here in the eastern capital, our home. He could never, ever abandon a familiar face...not even to save his own life. He was the kindest, sweetest, strongest, bravest, and most determined person I knew—like a legend out of the picture books we'd read as children. But if I ever told him that, he would frown, tenderly rub my head, and say, "Caren, I'm only doing what I can. And I know you'd do the same. After all, you're my only sister in the whole wide world, and I couldn't be prouder of you."

You idiot, Allen. You really are a complete fool. Don't you realize that I've just been following in your footsteps all this time—ever since that day I sprained my ankle, when you came, took me gently by the hand, and asked if I was all right? I was so desperate to catch up to you I nearly wore out the notebooks you left at home and all the books you sent back from the royal capital from reading them so much.

Even after I went to the Royal Academy, overtaking you was the only thing on my mind. All so that the next time you were in trouble, I could take you by the hand and say, "Saving their big brothers is what little sisters do." I set my heart on that, and I worked so hard. And finally, I thought that you were almost in arm's reach.

I won't let it end like this. I refuse to give up, no matter who I'm up against. This time, it's my turn to save you!

I drew my new, jet-black dagger, tossed it lightly into the air and focused my violet lightning. A crackling cross-headed spear materialized in my right hand, more imposing and easier to control than ever before. The color drained from the door guards' faces when they saw it, but the pair didn't back down.

"I gave you fair warning," I said. "I won't apologize, but I'll take my punishment when this is all over."

Then, a hoarse voice struck my ears. "Caren, no."

"Mom." I turned in surprise to see my mother, Ellyn. She was unsteady on her feet, showing none of the energy that normally made her seem younger than she was.

I rushed over to her and clasped her hand. It was dreadfully cold.

"Oh, Caren," she murmured. "You're so warm."

"Mom, please lie down," I said. "Dad will worry."

"You're the one we're worried about, Caren. You're making trouble for the young knights as we speak."

"I've gotten stronger, mom. I'm going to go save Allen!"

"Caren." Mom threw her arms around me. She had always been petite, and she had gotten even slighter over the past few days. She went on shaking as she reminisced: "He was never a handful, you know. Not even as a baby. He wouldn't so much as cry for the first few days. Nathan and I rushed him to a hospital, but there was nothing the matter with him. And he always...always smiled when he looked at me. There were hard times, when he was bullied, but even after he grew up, he smiled and talked to us every day. You can't imagine how happy that made us. And he never forgot to write to us from the royal capital." She chuckled. "I don't mind telling you now, but he was practically jumping for joy when he wrote us you'd been accepted to the Royal Academy."

"Mom," I said. But she ignored me and continued her monologue. Everyone around us was listening in. Kaya and Koko, who had followed me, looked like they were about to burst into tears. Even the girls from the royal guard and militia were trembling.

"I know we named him after a legendary hero who fought in the War of the Dark Lord, but...but Nathan and I never wanted him to become a hero too. Never. We just loved the old stories about how Shooting Star was always ready with a smile, kind to everyone—with a bit of a teasing streak—and brightened spirits just by being there. We wanted our boy to grow up the same way. That's why we named him Allen."

"Mom, that's...that's enough." Tears blurred my vision. My lightning spear vanished, leaving my dagger to fall and stick point-first in the floor.

"And we got our wish. He did grow up to be kind—the kindest boy in the world. The two of you are Nathan's and my pride and joy—our hope in life. That will never change. We've never regretted taking him in. In fact, we've always, *always* thanked the Great Tree for bringing us together that day, when we sheltered from the rain in an abandoned house. And why wouldn't we? Our little Allen is our only...our one and only son in the whole wide world. What does it matter if we're not blood related or if he doesn't have beast ears or a tail?! He's...He's my...He's our..."

"Mom!" I shouted, hugging her tight. I could hear weeping all around us as she continued her quiet lament.

"In that war, Shooting Star burned out protecting everyone. They say he smiled to the bitter end. Thanks to him, our peoples eked out a victory. He lit a flame of hope. But...But that's not what I wanted for my Allen. It's not! I just...just wanted him to smile and be healthy and come home to talk happily with us every once in a while. That's all. I never asked him to throw his life away to become a legend."

I still needed to go to Allen's rescue, but I could feel my strength draining away. Then, I sensed someone coming toward us, so I wiped my eyes, forced myself to stand, and turned to look at them.

There stood a young fox-clan woman whom I didn't know. Many other beastfolk, mostly of the fox clan as well, clustered behind her, all exuding sorrow. Two little fox-clan girls—maybe sisters—clung to her legs. Their eyes were red, probably from copious weeping. A fox-clan girl with dark-gray hair and tears streaming down her cheeks followed behind them.

The woman came up beside my mom and quietly asked, "Are you the relatives of a young man named Allen?"

My mom didn't respond, but I did. "Allen is my brother. What about him?"

Without warning, she crumpled to the floor, took my mother's hand, and launched into a halting string of thanks and apologies. "Oh, I'm so, so sorry. I don't know how to apologize or to thank you. Please forgive me. And I'm so, so very grateful!"

Mom and I didn't know what to make of it. I was still just as confused when the two little girls bowed to us as well.

"The nice man put me on the b-boat," the one with the longer hair told us through her tears. "He said he'd get on the last one."

"He promised me he'd go get my big sis," added the other, looking forlorn as she squeezed her sister's hand.

Allen. Allen! Allen*! You risked your own life just to keep a promise?! How could you be so stupid?! But...But you really are the best brother in the whole wide world.*

I crouched down and hugged the children. "Don't worry," I told them. "It will be all right. I'm on my way to go fetch my brother now."

"You mean it?"

"Is the nice man okay?"

The teary-eyed girls stared at me. I smiled and patted their heads, just like Allen would have done for me.

"Yes, he is," I said. "So don't cry, okay?"

"Okay," both girls answered hesitantly.

"Good." I dried their eyes with my sleeve and pulled my dagger out of the floor.

My doubts were gone. I knew what I ought to do, and I would do it. I would save my brother, and that was that!

The woman who had been bowing her head to my mother looked up. "Please wait," she said. There was firm determination in her eyes as she rose unsteadily to her feet, pressed a hand over her heart, and made a startling declaration. "I swear on my honor that I will repay my debt to Mr. Allen for saving my daughter and many of my clan. I should have introduced myself earlier. My name is Mizuho, and my elder sister, Hatsuho, is the fox-clan chieftain. I will petition her to invoke our Old Pledge with the rulers of the west—the Ducal House of Lebufera."

A faint ray of light shone in.

Allen, hang on just a little longer. This time, I'm *going to save* you*!*

*

Hatred and the stench of death filled the air. This place must have been left unused for centuries. I could see traces of ancient spell formulae, but most had long ceased to function. Magical lamps—which I took for a recent addition—were my only source of light in this world of darkness. The spiral staircase must have run terribly deep, because although our footfalls rang loudly as we descended, I heard no echo. And we were seemingly the only living people in the tower. I was in quite a fix.

"Keep moving!" an angry voice barked. "Don't think we'll let you get out of this one, mock beast—especially not with an unlucky name like yours! That bracelet we slapped on you is specially made; you won't cast a spell or escape our detection while it's on your wrist. And the inquisitorial curse baked into it will kill you in ten days anyway."

"This place has sheer cliffs on all sides and open sea at the bottom of them," added another. "Give up. You ought to be grateful we didn't execute you on the spot. Of course, you might end up wishing we had."

The two ashen-robed sorcerers pushing me along wore dark-gray insignias of the Church of the Holy Spirit around their necks. Both looked down their noses at me, contemptuous and triumphant.

Now this really takes me back. I used to get looks just like this at the Royal Academy.

I grinned, and the men took a startled half-step back. Then I resumed descending the stairs. There must have been something at the bottom, because the mana from below beggared belief. I glanced at the pair behind me and saw that their expressions had done an about-face. They were now pale with fear.

A growl rose from below, accompanied by waves of mana that made me feel as though my guts were being rearranged. I flinched in spite of myself.

Oh dear. Now this *is something to be afraid of.*

Having escorted me this far, the trembling sorcerers turned and bolted back up the stairs. Their faith in the Holy Spirit couldn't have amounted to much if they wouldn't even see their jobs through. I shrugged and continued downward, one step at a time.

On my descent, I passed by several cells strewn with the bones of people and unidentifiable animals. The tower must once have served as a prison, although its weathered masonry indicated that it had stood for several centuries at least. Salt poked through the stones in places, reminding me of what the men had said about sheer cliffs down to the sea.

I suppose this must be an eastern island in the Four Heroes Sea. And given its age and durability, I suspect it predates the War of the Dark Lord. Quite a grandiose prison for a humble tutor.

I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. I was still bleeding, and I ached from head to toe after the beating they'd given me before bringing me here. Even the wounds that the old grand knight had treated for me were oozing blood. What a rotten time to be unable to use magic. I could truly appreciate the hardships Tina and Lydia had been through.

I need to escape and hurry back. They'll all worry. And Lydia is a crybaby, although you'd never guess it.

Is Richard all right? I'd like to think so, but I hope he doesn't overdo it.

Mom, dad, and Caren must be furious. I owe them an apology later.

As I walked forward, the mana grew thicker. It was becoming difficult to breathe. If whatever lay ahead was alive, it must have been a freak of nature. Even with full command of my magic, I would stand no chance in a fight. That said, I couldn't afford to die for the time being—not until I found a sure way to control Blazing Qilin within Lydia and Frigid Crane within Tina, at the very least.

The rebels would have the entrance surrounded, and they would certainly kill me if I left that way. They presumably had some sinister reason for keeping me alive, but that was slender hope. I couldn't gamble on it. Meaning that my only option was to confront the monster in the depths.

How long have I been descending?

At last, I reached a vast room at the very bottom of the tower. Magical lamps from days of old still cast a faint light. Massive cells loomed on all sides, and I doubted they were meant to hold people. The three in front of me were empty. But one of the farthest held...something. The air felt a little thin and unpleasantly chilly. I seemed to hear growls from within the cell.

I've come all this way, so I might as well take a look.

But just as I was about to step forward, a party of knights of the Holy Spirit and gray-robed figures rushed down the stairs with a deafening clamor. I counted at least a dozen of them. They ringed me in, their swords and staves at the ready.

One of the gray robes—the man called Lev—struck me a heavy blow with his staff. I toppled to the cold stone floor with a grunt, unable to bear the pain.

"Know your place, ill-named mock beast," he said. "I'm impressed you didn't run."

"I appreciate the compliment," I replied haltingly. "Now, what would you like me to do for you?"

"Your role is simple—lift the seal of the Fire Fiend, then die. You're a disposable key, Allen, the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. Our leader, who will one day bring salvation to the entire world, told me so personally. I am no lesser new apostle like Rolog or Racom."

"The Fire Fiend?" I repeated. "Who are the new apostles? What on earth do you—"

Lev's staff came crashing down on my back again. "I'll bandy no more words with a mock beast," he announced coldly. "Throw him into the inner cell!"

This doesn't look good. I think I'm going to pass out.

I could feel knights of the Holy Spirit grab me from either side, but I was powerless to resist. I merely watched dimly as the open door of a massive cell drew closer. A chill ran down my spine. The knights carrying me must have felt it too.

One didn't even have time to scream before a fiery serpent sprang out of the cell and engulfed him. He vanished as though he had never been. The other knight watched in slack-jawed amazement. Before he could so much as draw his sword, the snake darted out again and annihilated him. Having lost my support, I crashed to the floor.

This is the same spell as the dagger Gerard—

The serpent's eyes met mine, and I spied a light of intelligence in them. It turned and retreated back into the cell. Was it calling me?

I gritted my teeth and crawled on my arms, dragging myself into the prison enclosed by inky darkness. From deep within, I could hear the snarls of a beast not of this world.

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. Long time no see. It's been four months. Despite the tumultuous state of the world, I managed to get this volume out on schedule!

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although, as usual, I've revised about ninety percent of it. I continue to test the limits of the word "revision"...but I haven't hit them yet.

Now, about this volume. You-know-who is having a rough time of it, but I bet you could have predicted that. Without him at her side, she's unquestionably the weakest of our leading ladies. (I'll leave you to guess who the strongest is.) But that's how she would have always been if she hadn't met him. Her heart is quite a bit weaker than a certain tiny northern noblewoman's, and it broke a long time ago.

As far as she's concerned, he's irreplaceable—literally the hope that keeps her living. Meanwhile, she has almost no regard for her own life. And now that he's not there to keep her recklessness in check, who will?

Find out in the coming volumes. Of course, the fallout of this one just upped the difficulty!

Now, I have some announcements to make:

The first volume of Tamura Muto's manga adaptation of *Private Tutor* went on sale this month! Everyone looks adorable.

Two of my novels won awards in the third Kakuyomu Web Novel Contest, and now the second one is finally in print. I hope you'll check out *Henkyō Toshi no Ikuseisha* (*The Mentor in a Frontier City*), which was released alongside this volume. Keep an eye on the female lead's family name!

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My former editor. Thank you so much. I look forward to your future work behind the scenes.

My new editor. I'm deeply in your debt, and I look forward to working with you on the next volume.

The illustrator, cura. Dark Lydia is perfect! I’m in awe of your art every volume.

And all of you who have read this far. I can’t thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. Next volume, it’s time for fairy tales and Old Pledges.

Riku Nanano

Duke Leinster's
eldest daughter
Lydia
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
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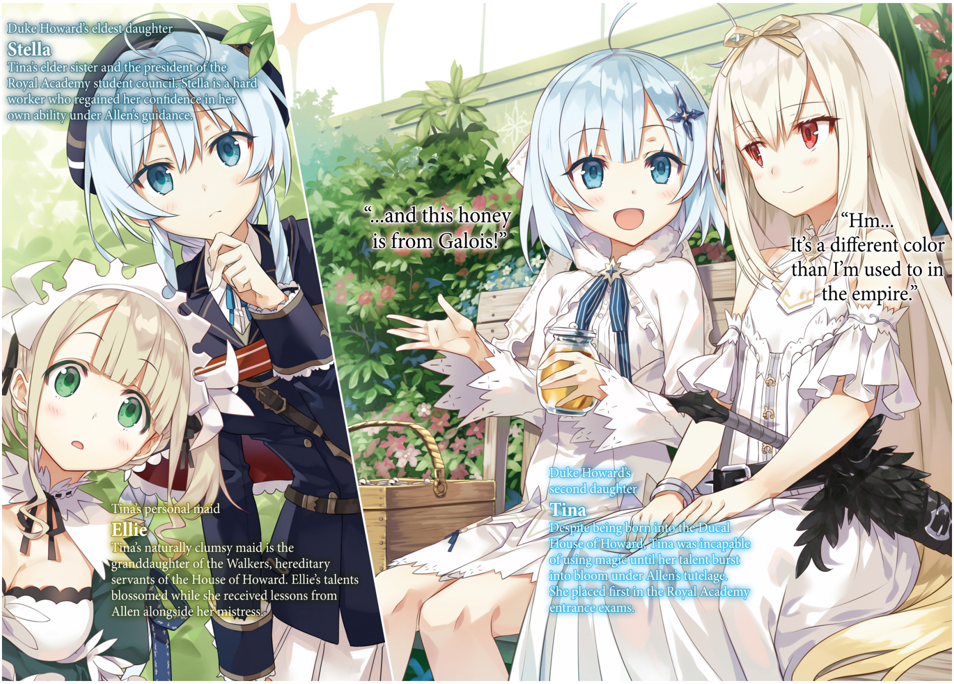

Duke Howard's eldest daughter

Stella

Tina's elder sister and the president of the Royal Academy student council. Stella is a hard worker who regained her confidence in her own ability under Allen's guidance.

Tina's personal maid

Ellie

Tina's naturally clumsy maid is the granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants of the House of Howard. Ellie's talents blossomed while she received lessons from Allen alongside her mistress.

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Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen's tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.

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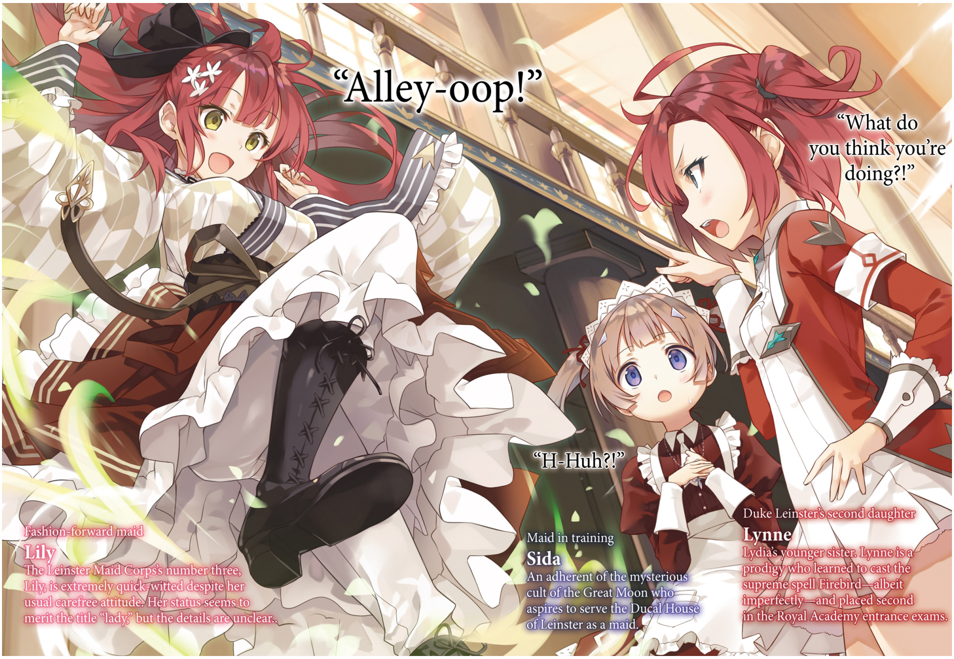
"Hm... It's a different color than I'm used to in the empire."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"What do you think you're doing?!"
"H-Huh?!"

Fashion-forward maid

Lily

The Leinster Maid Corps's number three, Lily, is extremely quick-witted despite her usual carefree attitude. Her status seems to merit the title "lady," but the details are unclear..

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Sida

An adherent of the mysterious cult of the Great Moon who aspires to serve the Ducal House of Leinster as a maid.

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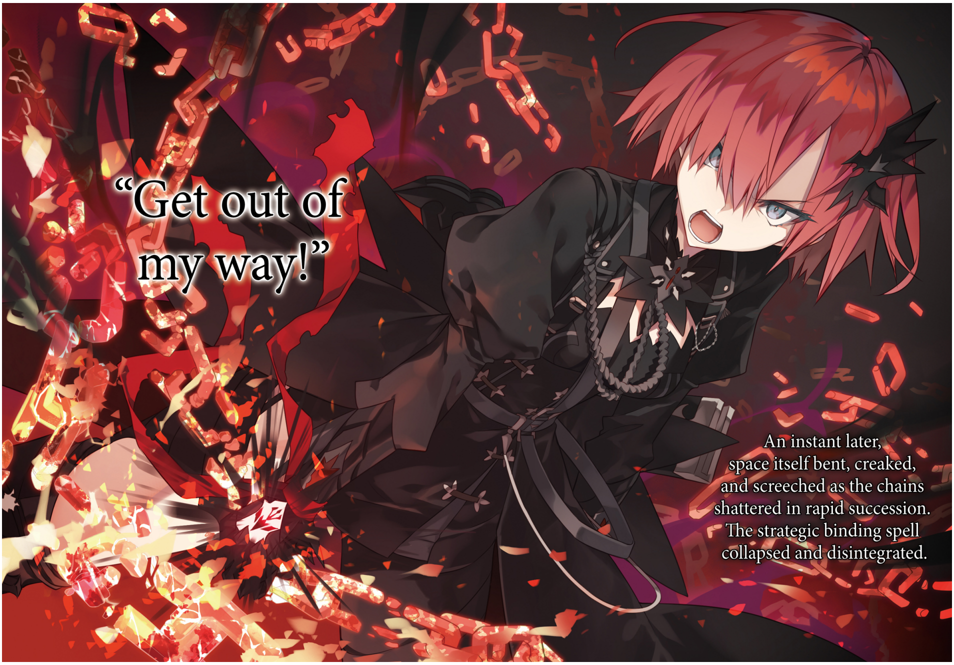
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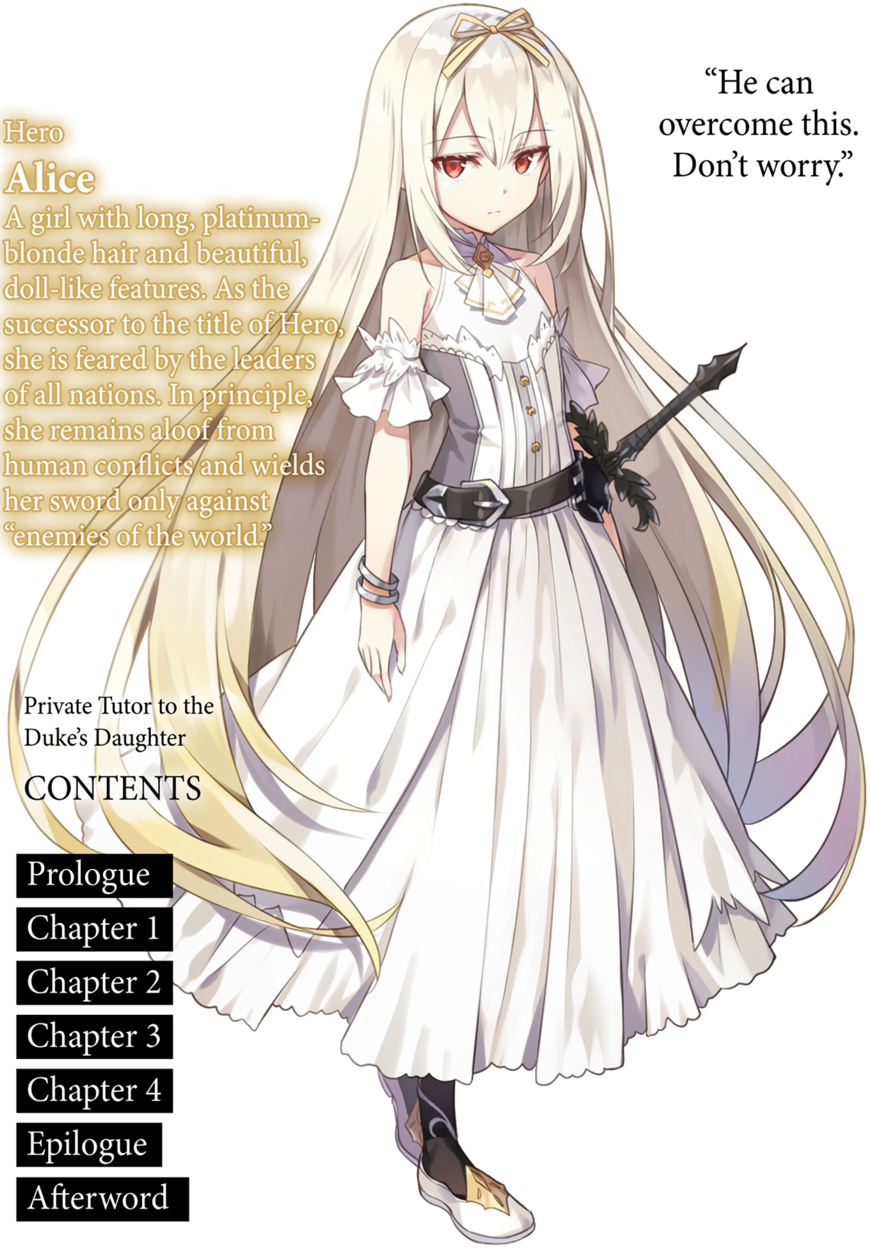

Hero

Alice

A girl with long, platinum-blonde hair and beautiful, doll-like features. As the successor to the title of Hero, she is feared by the leaders of all nations. In principle, she remains aloof from human conflicts and wields her sword only against "enemies of the world."

"He can overcome this. Don't worry."

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

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The Lady of the Sword's Lament
and the War in the South

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Duke Leinster's
eldest daughter
Lydia
Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter
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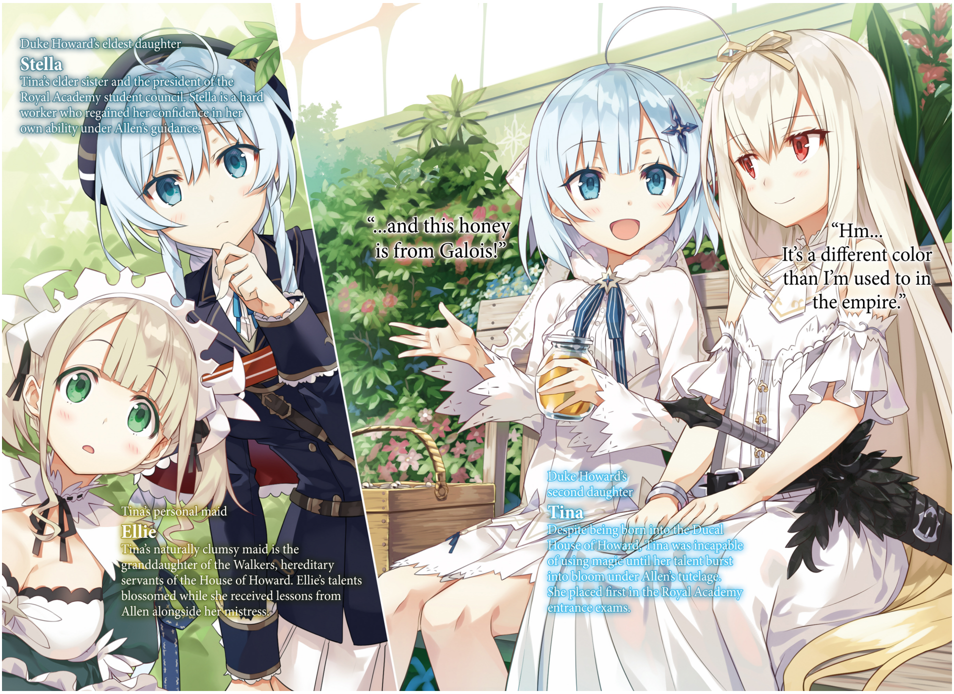
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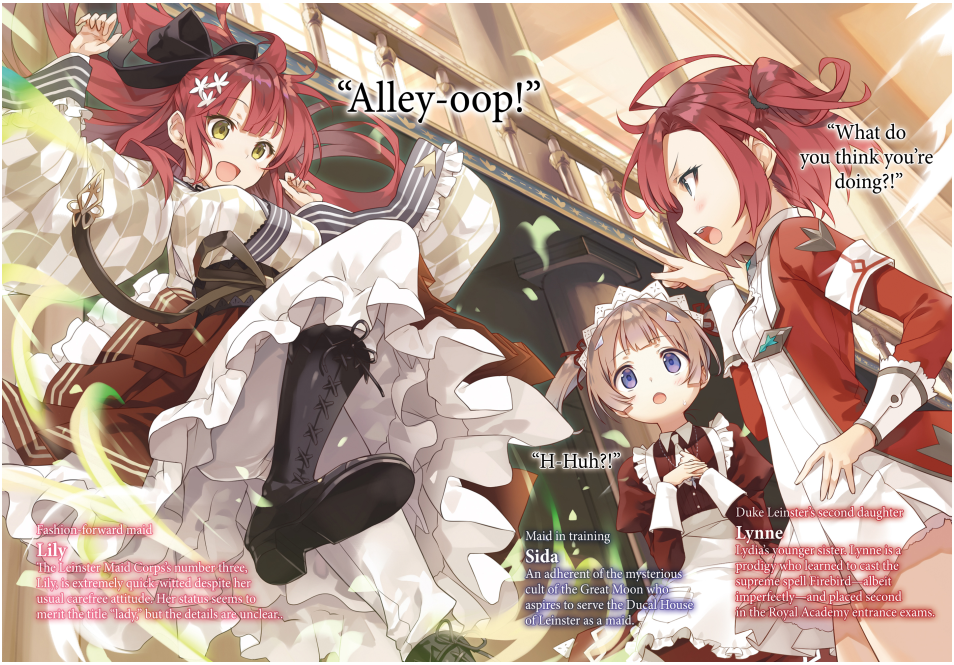

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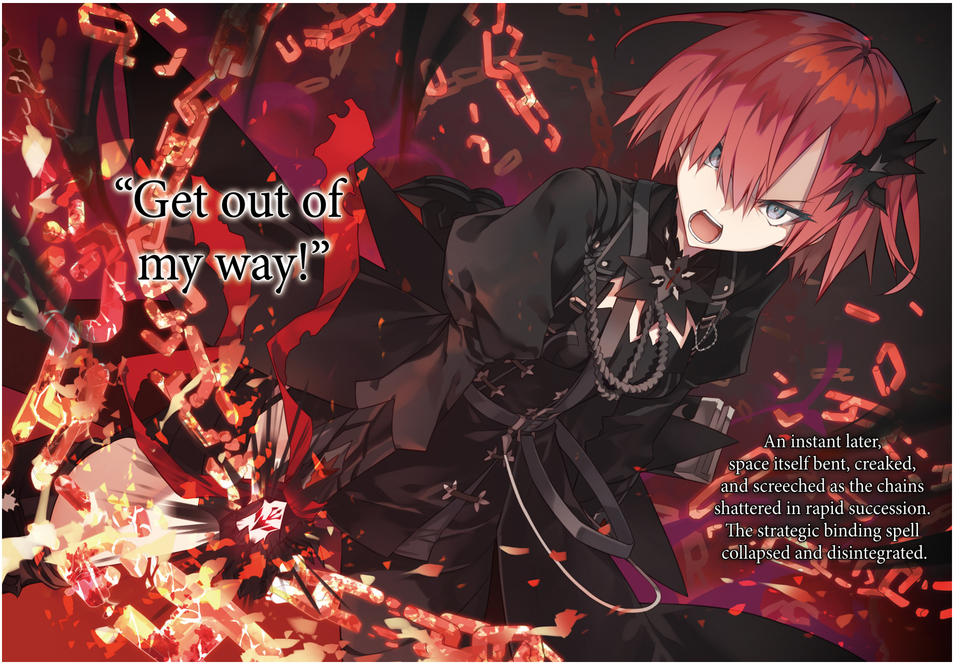

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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 6
by Riku Nanano

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2023
Premium E-Book